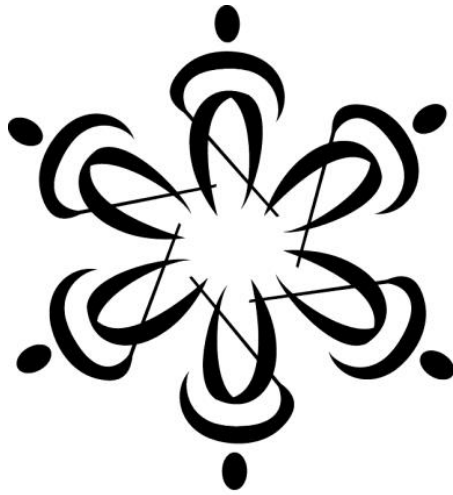


The 50th Annual State Convention
National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey



**Live the Life You Want -- Stronger Together Progress
& Possibilities**

Wednesday through Sunday

October 21, 22, 23, 24 & 25, 2026

Linda Melendez, President

908-590-1747

president@nfbnj.org

www.nfbnj.org

Who We Are and What We Do

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB), established in 1940, is the oldest and largest organization of and for the blind in the US and its territories. The NFB is made up of blind and low vision people of all ages, and their families and friends. We help blind people adjust to eyesight loss, assist parents and teachers of blind children, and promote the full participation and integration of blind people in our communities. Our activities include:

- Assisting blind persons in acquiring the skills of independence and developing confidence in themselves
- Supporting parents and teachers of blind children with information, mentoring, role modeling, and training
- Preparing blind students for careers and self-sufficiency through mentoring, training, and academic scholarships
- Encouraging blind seniors to continue to live active and meaningful lives
- Advocating policies that eliminate discrimination, promote civil rights, and guarantee equal access to high-quality educational and rehabilitation programs
- Sponsoring information campaigns and legislative action at the state and national levels
- Educating the public through community activities and publications

Spotlight on the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey (NFB of NJ)

Since 1976, the NFB of NJ, an affiliate of the NFB, has been providing invaluable information and resources to blind/low vision people throughout the state. Our members work together for a brighter tomorrow by raising expectations for blind people everywhere so that blind people can live the life they want. Our five chapters meet monthly; committees and groups meet at various times throughout the year. Please join us — we would welcome your participation and membership. For more information on the affiliate, chapters, committees, groups, programs, and projects, visit www.nfbnj.org

Integrity and Respect

To allow all attendees the chance to benefit from all aspects of the convention, we are committed to providing a harassment-free environment for everyone. We appreciate your assistance in cultivating an atmosphere in which participants from diverse backgrounds can learn, network, and share with each other in an environment of mutual respect. Thank you for doing your part to contribute to our community and the high expectations we strive to maintain. To read the NFB Code of Conduct, visit www.nfb.org/about-us/history-and-governance/code-conduct.

NFB Mission Statement

The NFB advances the lives of its members and all blind people in the United States and its territories. We know that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Every day, we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between them and their dreams. Our collective power, determination, and diversity achieve the aspirations of all blind people.

NFB Pledge

I pledge to participate actively in the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind to achieve equality, opportunity, and security for the blind; to support the policies and programs of the Federation; and to abide by its constitution.

Fragrance-Free Policy

The NFB of NJ's goal is to be sensitive to members with perfume and chemical sensitivities who, as a result, may suffer potentially serious health consequences. In order to address this concern, members and participants at conventions and other meetings should refrain from wearing scented products, including, but not limited to, perfumes, colognes, aftershave lotions, or similar products. We want to ensure full participation in all of our statewide activities.

Accessibility Statement

The NFB of NJ holds itself to the highest standards of inclusion in all our work. This commitment encompasses our in-person events as well as our virtual communications. To make accessibility-related requests or report barriers, don't hesitate to get in touch with Clarke King, 2nd VP, NFB of NJ, at director.legislation@nfbnj.org

Pre-Convention Happenings

The NFB of NJ affiliate offers multiple virtual events to equip attendees with information before our 50th annual state convention.

Resolutions Committee Meeting

October 19, 2026, 7 PM – 8 PM

Join us virtually as we review and discuss the proposed 2026 resolutions that may guide the NFB of NJ's priorities for the coming year. All interested members and guests are welcome to observe the committee's deliberations and voting process. All resolution authors must attend this virtual meeting. Resolutions that receive committee approval will advance to the General Session business meeting for consideration.

Zoom Information

<https://nfb-org.zoom.us/j/6477660103?pwd=MUI1dnZQU1JxMkhUemdCSHZUM21HUT09&omn=95930734701>

Meeting ID: 647 766 0103

Passcode: 460994

One tap mobile

+16469313860,,6477660103#,,,,*460994# US

Dial by your location

- +1 646 931 3860 US
- +1 646 876 9923 US (New York)

Hotel Orientation

Tropicana Atlantic City is a large resort complex with multiple towers, restaurants, entertainment venues, casino areas, and meeting spaces. The main hotel entrance and registration/check-in area are located on the Boardwalk side of the property. From the main lobby, guests can access the casino, dining options, shopping, and other resort amenities. The casino and many resort restaurants and entertainment venues are located in the central portion of the property, while The Quarter provides additional dining, shopping, and entertainment options.

The Havana Tower is located farther into the property, beyond the main lobby and casino areas, near The Quarter. The Havana Tower contains guest rooms as well as additional meeting and hospitality spaces. Convention activities will take place on the 3rd floor of the conference center in the Havana Tower.

Guide Dog Area

Exit the hotel onto Pacific Avenue and turn left towards Iowa Avenue. Please note that garbage pails are located on both sides of the exit doors as you leave the hotel and enter Pacific Avenue.

Quiet Room

Conga and Cha Cha

Need a break from the convention's busy energy? Visit our Quiet Space, a calm, supportive environment designed for rest and recharging. Whether you want a few moments of silence, a low-stimulus area to relax, or simply a chance to reset, this space is available to all attendees. Take a breath, refresh your mind, and get ready to fully participate in the convention experience.

Stay Connected During Convention

There are multiple ways to access the latest convention news.

- Opt in to receive text message updates. For daily convention agenda updates and time-sensitive changes, text 50155 with the word, "Convention." For bus transportation updates, text 50155 with the code NJBUS2026.
- Receive email updates with daily agendas. These emails will come from president@nfbnj.org.
- View the agenda and other essential convention items online by visiting [State Convention | National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey](#).
- Get involved on Facebook by following us at <https://m.facebook.com/NFB-NJ-353099574776238>.

Convention Happenings

Exhibit Hall

Bossa Nova

Visit our array of vendors and outreach resources on Thursday, October 22, from 9 AM to 2 PM. Be sure to thank them for participating in our convention.

Registration Desk & Pre-Registration Pick-Up and On-Site Registration

Registration Desk

Thursday, October 23 — 8:00 AM to 2:30 PM

Thursday, October 23 — 6:30 PM to 7:00 PM

Friday, October 24 — 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM

Sat., October 25 — 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM

Renewing Annual Affiliate Membership

Castanet

Would you like to renew your affiliate membership to join a committee, group, program, or project? Then come pay your dues and remain an affiliate member on Friday, October 24, from 8:00 to 8:25 AM. Annual dues are \$10. You can also renew your membership by clicking the link below and paying online with PayPal or a credit/debit card, or by mailing a check to NFB of NJ, PO Box 2202, Vincentown, NJ 08088, payable to the NFB of NJ. Please write "NFB of NJ dues" in the memo section.

<https://www.nfbnj.org/affiliate-membership-renew-member-form>

Pre-Purchased Saturday Banquet Ticket Exchange

Bring your pre-purchased banquet ticket to the exchange ticket table, where you will then receive a ticket with a table number. Each banquet table seats 8 individuals. You may trade banquet tickets at the same time to obtain seats at the same table. You must have everyone's ticket when visiting the exchange table. Indicate if you are also bringing an aide, PCA, or SSP to ensure that space is available at your assigned table. If you do not exchange your ticket, you will be seated where space is available. Open seating will begin promptly at 7:15 PM; no holding of seats is permitted!

50/50 Raffle

Support the affiliate by purchasing 50/50 raffle tickets, 1 for \$5, 3 for \$10, and eight for \$20. Watch for opportunities to purchase during the convention or look for Annemarie Cooke, Chair, Raffle Committee.

Door Prizes

Door prizes will be drawn for pre-registered conventioners and announced throughout the technology seminar, general sessions, and banquet. You must be inside the room when your name is called to claim your prize. Donated door prizes are welcome and can be dropped off at the Registration Desk when it is open.

Portrait Studio

Prior to the 50th anniversary banquet, attendees can capture the moment in photos taken by a professional photographer. The background for these photos will feature the 50th Anniversary NFB of New Jersey logo; location to be announced during convention.

Pictures & Recording

We will take pictures throughout the convention and record convention segments, which will be available on the website.

Host Chapter

We are pleased to announce that this year's host chapter is the South Jersey Shore Chapter, whose members have aided with various convention activities. Only a host chapter is permitted to fundraise during the convention. Please support them.

Monday, October 19

7:00 PM

Resolutions Committee

Join us virtually as we review and discuss the proposed 2026 resolutions that may guide the NFB of NJ's priorities for the coming year. All interested members and guests are welcome to observe the committee's deliberations and voting process. Resolutions that receive committee approval will advance to the General Session business meeting for consideration.

Join Zoom

<https://nfb-org.zoom.us/j/6477660103?pwd=MUI1dnZQU1JxMkhUemdCSHZUM21HUT09&omn=95930734701>

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Dial by your location

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- +1 646 876 9923 US (New York)

Meeting ID: 647 766 0103

Passcode: 460994

Wednesday, October 21

4:00 PM-7:00 PM

Affiliate Networking

Summit Hospitality Suite

Stop by for snacks and conversation as you network with fellow attendees and affiliate members. Share experiences, make new connections, and enjoy an evening of fellowship and fun.

Thursday, October 22

7:00 AM-8:30 AM

Pre-Purchased Breakfast Buffet

Mambo

9:00 AM-2:00 PM

Exhibit Hall

Bossa Nova

Visit our exhibitors to view fine products and learn about services and resources available for people who are blind or have low vision. Speak directly with representatives, explore available resources, and have your questions answered.

9:00 AM

Meet President Riccobono

Castanet

Join us for a Meet & Greet with National Federation of the Blind President Mark Riccobono. This informal gathering offers an opportunity to connect with President Riccobono, ask questions, share ideas, and discuss the Federation.

10:00 AM

Senior Gathering - Sandy Halverson & Jane Degenshein

Castanet

This is an interactive discussion geared towards seniors and open to all. Join this discussion about family dynamics, offering advice to family members, setting personal

boundaries, and helping loved ones become more comfortable and at ease with blindness. Participants will share experiences and techniques for helping family members understand, support, and believe in our independence and ability to live the lives we want.

11:00 AM

Bus Arrives

12:00 PM-1:15 PM

Lunch

12:00 PM-12:30 PM

Pre-Purchased Boxed Lunch Pickup

Mambo

12:15 PM-1:00 PM

Lunch Gathering for First-Timers and Interested Individuals

Mambo

1:30 – 4:30 PM

Technology Seminar

Castanet

Explore new features in iOS, artificial intelligence tools, screen access options, streaming and cable alternatives, and practical apps that can enhance everyday life. Hear from experienced technology users, learn valuable tips and shortcuts, share your favorite tips, and gain new ideas and resources to help you get the most from your devices. We welcome all tech enthusiasts and curious learners to attend and join the conversation!

5:00 PM-9:00 PM

Cash Bar

Mambo

Credit and debit cards accepted.

5:30 PM

Pre-Purchased Pasta Bar Dinner

Mambo

6:30 PM

Anniversary and Birthday Costume Party Celebration

Mambo

Help us celebrate a very special 50th birthday in style! Enjoy desserts, connect with fellow attendees, and join in the fun with festive costumes (optional).

Friday, October 23

7:00 AM-8:30 AM

Pre-Purchased Breakfast Buffet

Mambo

8:00 AM – 8:25 AM

Banquet Exchange

Mambo

8:30 AM

Pre-General Session Music

Castanet

9:00 AM

General Session A

Castanet

- Opening Ceremony
- Welcome from Atlantic City Mayor Marty Small Sr.
- Announcements
- National Report - Mark Riccobono, President, National Federation of the Blind
- Fit Break – Evelyn Valdez, NFB of Virginia
- NJ District 2 Senator Vincent Polistina & Assemblyman Donald A. Guardian
- Establishment of Affiliate - John Halverson, NFB of Virginia

12:00 PM-1:15 PM

Lunch

12:00 PM-12:30 PM

Pre-Purchased Boxed Lunch Pickup

Mambo

12:15 PM-1:15 PM

Breakout Lunch Discussion Groups

Federation Philosophy: Think You Know? Let's Talk!

Bossa Nova

Join National President Mark Riccobono for a lively, hour-long discussion of Federation philosophy—the pattern of thought and ideas shaped by the lived experience of blind people. Where does it come from, what does it mean, and how do we put it into action? Whether you're new to the movement or think you already know it all, bring your questions, share your experience, and be ready to stretch your thinking.

NFB of NJ Senior Gathering

Summit Hospitality Suite

Join the seniors for an engaging conversation to share ideas, experiences, and practical tips for living a more productive and independent life as a blind member of our society.

1:15 PM

Pre-General Session Music

Castanet

1:30 PM-4:30 PM

General Session B

Castanet

- Announcements
- Senator Booker, Recorded Greeting
- Department of Human Services - Deputy Kaylee McGuire and New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired - Executive Director Dr. Bernice Davis
- New Jersey State Library Talking Book & Braille Center - Elizabeth Burns, Executive Director
- Fit Break - Qualik Ford, National Association of Blind Students (NABS) Representative
- Joseph Ruffalo: 27 Years of Leadership, Service, and Progress
- Presidential Report - Linda Melendez, President, NFB of New Jersey

5:00 PM

Federation Family Meal

Mambo

6:00 – 6:25 PM

Banquet Exchange

Mambo

7:00 PM-11:00 PM

Cash Bar

Castanet

Credit and debit cards accepted.

7:00 PM

Affiliate Auction

Castanet

Don't miss this popular convention tradition! Bid on an assortment of gift baskets, certificates, experiences, and other great items. Whether you're hunting for a bargain or simply enjoying the entertainment and excitement, you're sure to have a memorable experience.

8:30 PM

Extreme Family Feud

Castanet

This is *not* your traditional Family Feud! Bring a team or join one on the spot and get ready for fast-paced fun, unexpected challenges, and plenty of laughs. The wheel of options will spin throughout the night, prompting teams to choose top-rated survey answers, complete a challenge, recall song lyrics, or track down scavenger-hunt items. Think fast, work together, and see if your family has what it takes to take home the prize!

Saturday, October 24

7:00 AM-8:30 AM

Pre-Purchased Breakfast Buffet

Mambo

8:00 AM – 8:25 AM

Banquet Exchange

Mambo

8:30 AM

Pre-General Session Music

9:00 AM

General Session C

Castanet

- Announcements
- NFB of NJ Scholarship Class of 2026 - Lia Stone, Director of Youth Programs
- National Association of Blind Students (NABS) Report - Qualik Ford
- Fit Break - President Riccobono
- Looking Back, Moving Forward: Scholarship Alumni Reflections – Lia Stone
- Legislation - Clarke King, NFB of NJ Legislative Director
- NJ Parents of Blind Children – Carol Castellano
- Nominating Committee Report – Tony Santiago, Affiliate BOD

12:00 PM-1:15 PM

Lunch

12:00 PM-12:30 PM

Pre-Purchased Boxed Lunch Pickup

Mambo

12:15 PM-1:00 PM

Breakout Lunch Discussion Groups

- NFB of NJ Student Gathering – *Bossa Nova*
- NFB of NJ Parents of Blind Children - Bongo

1:15 PM

Pre-General Session Music

Castanet

1:30 PM-4:00 PM

General Session D

Castanet

- Randolph-Sheppard Update - Mark Riccobono, President, National Federation of the Blind
- Affiliate Annual Business Meeting

4:30 – 4:45 PM

Final Banquet Exchange

Mambo

7:00 PM

Banquet

Castanet

Maestra of Ceremonies—Jane Degenshein, Board Member, NFB of NJ; Chair, Senior and Technology Committees

Invocation

Recognition of Sponsorship

Keynote Address—Mark Riccobono, President, NFB

Presentation of State Scholarship Awards —Lia Stone, Director of Youth Programs, NFB of NJ

Door Prizes

Sunday, October 25

8:00 AM-9:30 AM

Breakfast Buffet

Castanet

9:30 AM-11:00 AM

More Than a Membership Card: Building Our Federation

Castanet

What does it mean to belong to the National Federation of the Blind—and how do we inspire others to join us? Gather with Federation leaders for an open, lively discussion about membership, active participation, and growing our movement. Whether you're brand-new or a longtime Federationist, bring your questions and ideas as we explore how to turn a first welcome into a lasting connection

12:00 PM

Bus Departure

Agenda subject to change

National Scholarship Program

Every year, the National Federation of the Blind awards more than \$250,000 to blind scholars across fifty states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, in recognition of their academic achievements and professional aspirations. Each scholarship is awarded on the basis of academic excellence, community service, and leadership. For information on eligibility, requirements, application, checklist, and FAQs, please visit:

<https://www.nfb.org/programs-services/scholarships-and-awards/scholarship-program>

Let others know about this program that invests in the future of blind people.

Pre-Authorized Contribution Plan (PAC Plan)

The PAC Plan helps fund important projects such as the NFB Free White Cane program and is also used to take care of “rainy day” expenditures that may arise unexpectedly.

Contributors designate an amount, which can be as little as five dollars per month, to be automatically deducted from a checking or savings account or charged to a credit card. To arrange for PAC Plan contributions, go to www.nfb.org/pac and fill out the form. The National Center will call you to get payment information. You can also call 877-635-2711 or email pac@nfb.org to enroll.

Sponsors

Waymo — Sponsor & Exhibitor

Waymo is an autonomous driving technology company working to make transportation safer and more accessible. Convention attendees will have an opportunity to learn about autonomous vehicles, accessibility, and the potential for autonomous transportation to expand independent mobility.

HumanWare — Sponsor & Exhibitor

HumanWare is a global leader in assistive technology for people who are blind or have low vision. Its products include Braille displays and notetakers, accessible reading products, navigation technology, and low-vision solutions designed to increase independence.

Everest Dispensary — Sponsor & Exhibitor

Everest Dispensary is an Atlantic City business serving adults age 21 and older within New Jersey's regulated cannabis market.

Rogue State Games — Sponsor

Rogue State Games is a New Jersey gaming and hobby shop offering collectible card games, tabletop games, miniature games, and opportunities for gaming community members to play and connect.

The Degenshein Family — Sponsor

NFBNJ gratefully recognizes the Degenshein Family for their generous support of our 50th Anniversary State Convention and our continued work in the blind community.

Exhibitors

Association of Blind Athletes of New Jersey

The Association of Blind Athletes of New Jersey promotes inclusive sports, recreation, fitness, and active lifestyles for people who are blind or have low vision.

Democracy Live

Democracy Live develops accessible voting technology designed to provide voters, including voters with disabilities, with greater independent access to ballots, election information, and the voting process.

iCanConnect,

The National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program provides eligible people with combined vision and hearing loss with accessible communications technology and training at no cost. Learn how individualized equipment and support help people who are deafblind communicate independently, access information, and stay connected.

JW.ORG

JW.ORG is the official website of Jehovah's Witnesses and provides free access to the Bible, publications, videos, educational information, and other resources in numerous languages and accessible formats.

MIVI Lab

MIVI Lab joins the NFBNJ exhibit hall to share information about its work, services, and resources. Convention attendees are encouraged to visit the exhibit, meet its representatives, and learn more about its work.

NJ Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired:

This agency's mission is to promote and provide services in the areas of education, employment, independent living and eye health through informed choice and partnership with persons who are blind or low vision, their families and the community.

NJ TBBC:

The New Jersey State Library Talking Book and Braille Center loans books and magazines, in audio and braille, at no-cost to New Jersey residents of all ages who are blind or have a print disability. TBBC provides these services as a network library of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS). Audio and braille books can be mailed to patrons, or downloaded onto a smartphone or tablet with our mobile app. TBBC also offers large-print books for children and teen patrons to borrow. We also offer braille calendars and currency reader devices.

NJ TRANSIT Accessible Services / Access Link

NJ TRANSIT provides accessible transportation services and resources throughout New Jersey. Access Link is NJ TRANSIT's ADA paratransit service for eligible individuals who are unable to use local fixed-route bus service for some or all of their trips.

OceanFirst Bank

OceanFirst Bank is a community-focused financial institution providing personal and business banking, digital banking, commercial financing, and other financial services while maintaining a strong commitment to the communities it serves.

The Seeing Eye

Founded in 1929 and based in Morristown, New Jersey, The Seeing Eye breeds, raises, and trains Seeing Eye dogs and instructs people who are blind in their use and care. The organization also supports advocacy, education, and resources related to guide-dog access and independence.

With Appreciation

The National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey extends our sincere appreciation to all of our sponsors and exhibitors for helping make our 50th Anniversary State Convention possible. Your partnership and support help advance accessibility, opportunity, independence, and full participation for blind people throughout New Jersey.

<https://www.nfbnj.org/state-convention/exhibitors-and-sponsors>

National Representative - Mark Riccobono, President, National Federation of the Blind

Born in 1976, Mark Riccobono is the only child of two hard-working parents of modest means. Both were high school graduates, and, although they encouraged their son and gave him an example of what persistence and hard work could do, they had no experience of higher education and no familiarity with blindness. Riccobono was diagnosed as legally blind at the age of five, glaucoma being the disease that took his sight. Although he knew he had a vision problem, as a child he never felt limited in what he could do. Being an only child just meant he relied more on friends, and his elementary years have left him with good memories. He benefited from going to his neighborhood school because his contact with children was not just at school but in play, birthday celebrations, and school holidays. His low vision meant he sometimes had to work harder, but the print was large, he got a seat in the front of the room, his teachers did what they could to help, and his friends were comfortable with their buddy who didn't see quite as well as they did. "I was comfortable in my own skin, and that made others around me comfortable as well." The obstacles he faced and the fact that he had some limitations simply emphasized that he should do what his parents did when things got tough: they just worked hard and powered through, and powering through became an indispensable part of his personality.

In accepting the Presidency of this organization, I pledged to give all of my energy, my creativity, and my love to our movement. This is how I intend to pay it back, pay it forward, and make a future full of opportunities for blind people. I have no illusions that this will be easy, but I have every expectation that it will happen when all of us pull together to create the kind of future in which we truly live the lives we want.

Riccobono got a particularly good elementary education, but found himself in a rough middle school. It was probably what would be called a failing school today. Many of his elementary school friends went to other middle schools, so his social network began to evaporate. Now there were new friends to make and already established groups who had reservations about adding new members to their circles, and this further added to what was already a difficult transition. The year before he entered the school there had been a stabbing, and little emphasis was placed on academic success. This was the place where he learned to stay under the radar, to isolate himself from others, and to decide his place was in the back of the classroom, where he was less likely to be noticed or called on. There were no services to deal with vision loss, and the

only accommodation he could recall receiving was a special lock for his locker that he could operate.

Without an effective way to read and to see the blackboard, he learned to rely on memory, but even a good memory could not consistently deliver good test scores, and he believes that sometimes he was simply passed.

Riccobono remembers that he was sometimes challenged to do better and that often it was the math teachers who would ask more of him. But he was all too frequently allowed just to exist there in the back of the room with the students least likely to raise their hands, shout out answers, or be called upon by the classroom teacher. Riccobono describes this as learning to "be a passenger in my own life."

To add to the difficulty of middle school, surgeries for glaucoma in eighth grade not only caused him to miss school but eventually cost him a significant amount of the little vision he had. An uncle who observed these futile attempts asked his nephew, "What are you going to do if it doesn't work? What will you do if you don't get vision back?"

"I began to ask myself with each surgery whether we might not be chasing the unreachable dream," Riccobono said. The surgery performed to burn off some of the scar tissue proved to be too effective, destroying the vision in his left eye and eventually causing it to shrink.

So, Riccobono went into high school blind in one eye and with little vision in the other. In Milwaukee one could choose a high school based on its specialty, and Riccobono chose the one that emphasized business and becoming an entrepreneur. Unbeknownst to him when he made his choice, this school had a resource room for blind students. This was the first time he had considered that there might be others facing the challenges that made school difficult.

Riccobono is glad he chose to attend high school emphasizing business. The teachers saw potential in him, and, for the first time in a long time, he found himself surrounded by people who believed he had capacity. "High school was better than middle school had been; it had some very good teachers who believed in my capacity, and it had people who worked to mentor me. They didn't understand where blindness fit into my career possibilities, but they knew how to teach, saw potential in me, and were determined to cultivate it."

He joined DECA, an association founded in 1946 to prepare emerging leaders and entrepreneurs. In this organization, he engaged in competitions in public

speaking, marketing, and creating a business plan. As a high school senior, he participated in statewide competitions, where he won first place in public speaking and earned himself the opportunity to compete in national competitions representing the state of Wisconsin. During that same year he started a school-based business selling sports cards based on a business plan he developed the previous year.

After high school, Riccobono arrived at the University of Wisconsin with a folding cane, a laptop computer with no screen-reading or screen-enlargement software, and a closed-circuit television to enlarge paper documents. "I had to study a lot because I read slowly and memorization was the key to any success I might enjoy." But even with the extreme focus he placed on academics, Riccobono hit the wall in his sophomore year and almost failed a computer class because he had no access to the machines. Eventually his rehabilitation counselor sent him for a technology evaluation, and the use of speech and other technology was recommended. At this point Riccobono started reaching out to other blind people, knowing that, if some of them were successful, they had to be doing something he was not. He knew that the barriers he was facing were real and that he was making a significant effort to overcome them, but he was learning that effort alone was not enough: he needed techniques, strategies, and building on the experiences of others. So it was that he came to find the National Federation of the Blind, won a state scholarship, and attended the national convention in 1996. "A lot of what I heard at the convention resonated with me—gave me real hope—but I wasn't sure it was real because I hadn't had the chance to test it myself. But whatever skepticism I had, the truth is that my predominant emotions were excitement and hope that what these people were saying was true. For the first time in my life, it was clear to me that in this group it didn't matter how much or how little I could see. In this group no one ever asked or tried to limit where I could go. For the first time I didn't feel as though I had to decide what I would or would not do based on my vision."

In the summer after he found the Federation, Riccobono learned Braille, started using the white cane, and came to understand that blind people used other techniques that might help him. He immediately began testing what the Federation said about blindness and encouraged other students to do the same. In the fall of 1996, he founded and became the first president of the Wisconsin Association of Blind Students (a division of the NFB of Wisconsin). He also began rebuilding his dreams. He secured employment with the disability resource center on campus and coordinated the delivery of accessible materials

to other students. Riccobono also began expanding his participation in the campus community, knowing that blindness was not the thing that held him back but rather his own low expectations learned over many years. Among his new activities Riccobono became the first blind person at the university to be certified to independently sail one-person sail boats in the Hoofers Sailing Program on Lake Mendota.

Riccobono finished college in May of 1999 with a degree in business administration, majoring in marketing and minoring in economics. He interviewed with Sears in his senior year of college and already had a job offer in hand when he graduated. While attending the Washington Seminar, people asked what he intended to do between his graduation in May and the start of his new job in August. They suggested he use this time for training. Finding the advice sound, he attended the Colorado Center for the Blind. There he worked on attitudes and skills and had a chance to test some of the Federation ideas he had thought about with such hope. He found they had verity in his life.

After training with Sears, Riccobono moved to Oak Creek, Wisconsin, where he rented an apartment about three blocks from where he had grown up. At this point he was feeling good about himself: a college graduate with a job, living on his own, and the recently elected president of the National Federation of the Blind of Wisconsin, having won that post in 1998. Before his election a proposal had been advanced to close the state's school for the blind. Riccobono was appointed to serve on an advisory committee charged with transforming the institution from a school to a center where ten programs serving the blind would be housed, one of them being the school for the blind. Riccobono learned from the Federation that his true passion was not necessarily business (although he exhibits the thinking of an entrepreneur in everything he does) but rather education and building innovative educational programs. When the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired was established, Riccobono was hired as its director shortly before his twenty-fourth birthday. He headed an agency with a budget of six million dollars and began to implement programs that required more of staff and students, consistent with the expectations of blind people he found in the Federation. He worked at the Wisconsin Center for three and a half years, and an audit ordered by the implementing legislation gave the new center good marks and was the best the school had received in over a decade. But Riccobono found making changes at the center painfully slow and thought that his focus on improving education would be better served by working on a national level. Having concluded that Riccobono possessed some skills that would be valuable at the Jernigan

Institute, President Maurer hired him, and he and his wife Melissa (a strong leader, advocate, and educator in her own right) moved to Baltimore. After working for some time in education, he became the executive director of the Jernigan Institute, a position he held until his election as the President of the National Federation of the Blind in July of 2014. In his Federation work he has led a number of critical initiatives including: establishment of the National Center for Blind Youth in Science, building a national mentoring program, expanding Braille literacy programs including the NFB Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning program, development of cutting-edge technologies including a car that a blind person can drive (the NFB Blind Driver Challenge®), many advocacy priorities, affiliate-building projects, and serving as a point person for key relationships with NFB partners.

Mark and Melissa have three children: Cynthia born in December 2006, Oriana was born in May 2010, and Elizabeth was born in June 2012, all of whom are growing up in the Federation. Two of their daughters carry the same eye condition that Mark has, but they will have greater opportunities than their dad because of their connection to the National Federation of the Blind. With the emphasis on social media, YouTube, and communication that goes beyond the written word, his family and their activities have been more visible than those of earlier leaders. "While as a family we draw some lines, we are generally pretty comfortable with letting people know what we are doing, the message being that we lead normal lives and do the same things others with children do. We try to show people what we have learned—that blindness does not prevent us from being the kind of parents we want to be and from living the lives we want." Riccobono is always building—his social media presence frequently shows him engineering new creations out of Legos with his children.

When asked about his responsibilities as the newly elected President of the National Federation of the Blind and whether it is scary trying to fill the shoes of former President Maurer, Riccobono says, "It isn't so much trying to fill someone's shoes as building on a foundation. It is a tremendous responsibility to figure out how to go farther, to strengthen the movement, to lead in such a way that we go forward and build on what we have been given. My challenge is to meet the expectations of folks who have given a lot and have been around a long time, to meet their expectations and let them know they are still wanted, valued, and needed, while at the same time recognizing that the world is changing, that the organization must continue to evolve, and assuring people that these requirements are not in conflict but a part of continuing to exist and thrive. I worry less about the shoes I must fill or the comparisons that will be

made than I do about figuring out how to lead us in the miles we must go, preserving the resources we have, while spending enough of them to make the world what we want it to be. I feel grateful that Dr. Maurer recognizes my challenge—he has had to face it in his own transition and Presidency, and I feel confident that most of our members understand this too. The nature of this office demonstrates daily just how far we have to go, and, although we have a tremendous organization and significant resources, we have just a fraction of what we need to do the work that remains."

"In accepting the Presidency of this organization, I pledged to give all of my energy, my creativity, and my love to our movement. This is how I intend to pay it back, pay it forward, and make a future full of opportunity for blind people. I have no illusions that this will be easy, but I have every expectation that it will happen when all of us pull together to create the kind of future in which we truly live the lives we want."

The National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey expresses its appreciation to all members and non-members who attended our 50th Annual State Convention

Thank you for coming

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For the list of affiliate board members, chapters, committees, groups, and programs, please visit www.nfbnj.org.

We are grateful to all those who contributed time, effort, and ideas to the 50th Annual State Convention of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, **Live the Life You Want -- Stronger Together Progress & Possibilities**