

# The Spectacle

**-Dare to stand out**

**November 2024**

# ****What’s included this month?****

* College 101 invite
* Peer Ambassador information
* APH’s new *Getting Started Guides*
* New Blind Abilities podcasts
* Assistive technology updates
* Fast Forward: Potential and Opportunities featuring Walter Waranka!

# Just for Fun

Attention cat and dog lovers! Did you know there is an event in Minneapolis called Wedge LIVE! Cat Tour where attendees walk around the Lowry Hill East neighborhood, also known as the Wedge neighborhood, in Minneapolis? Cat owners throughout the neighborhood share their cats in their windowsills and front doorways for participants to see and sometimes interact with. The event has been going on since 2017 and over 20 cats registered for the tour in 2024, attracting a large crowd. There is a similar event for dogs called the NE Dog Parade, an annual event in Northeast Minneapolis with contests and prizes for best dog costumes, best trick, and best look-alike.

# Upcoming and Ongoing

## College 101 Event

Are you interested in attending college to gain the education and training needed to meet your employment goals? Do you have questions about what the transition to college will look like and what skills are needed to be successful in higher academics? If so, please consider joining State Services for the Blind at this College 101 webinar to learn more about college preparation!

**What**: Webinar to learn from current college and PSEO students about the skills needed for success in higher education. Please join us for the conversation and feel free to ask questions you have about college.

**Who**: Any prospective college student in high school or recently graduated from high school, parents and teachers. Three current college and PSEO students will serve as panelists to discuss their experiences at college and answer questions.

**When**: Monday, November 25th, 6:00 PM – 7:30 PM

**Where**: Zoom! [Please click here to register](https://www.zoomgov.com/webinar/register/WN_Dey0PTqgRya460hk3s6WUQ)

If you have any questions, please contact Shane DeSantis at shane.desantis@state.mn.us or 651-358-5205.

## SSB Peer Ambassadors

Two SSB students conduct peer-to-peer programming for students across the state to instruct students with vision loss on various topics of interest. They can meet with others one-on-one for peer discussion and are planning virtual and in-person group activities! Contact Amy at [amyarias0508@gmail.com](mailto:amyarias0508@gmail.com) or Maddy at [major.madeline7@gmail.com](mailto:major.madeline7@gmail.com) to learn about upcoming opportunities or to chat directly with them.

## A Note from SSB Counselors

Hello, students! We hope your school year is off to a great start and that you’re looking forward to the holidays and any traditions you recognize this time of year. At SSB, we are continuing to plan various activities throughout the year, so please keep in touch and be on the lookout for opportunities. If there is any subject or training area you would like SSB to address, please let us know, as we are happy to look into any recommendations!

## SSB Communication Center

The Communication Center is here to put your books into accessible formats that work for you. Custom audio, e-text, DAISY markup, and Braille - we can do it! The Communication Center is Minnesota’s Accessible Reading Source – we’re here for you. Email us at [ssb.audioservices@state.mn.us](mailto:ssb.audioservices@state.mn.us)

## PACER

PACER Center “enhances the quality of life and expands opportunities for children, youth, and young adults with all disabilities and their families so each person can reach his or her highest potential. PACER operates on the principles of parents helping parents, supporting families, promoting a safe environment for all children, and working in collaboration with others.” For upcoming webinars and workshops, visit [PACER's workshops website.](https://www.pacer.org/workshops/)

## ****Disability Hub MN****

“Disability Hub MN is a free statewide resource network that helps you solve problems, navigate the system, and plan for your future. We can help you create your best life, your way.” This website has a variety of resources on topics such as disability benefits through the [DB101 website](https://mn.db101.org/), information on housing resources through their [HB101 website](https://mn.hb101.org/), and a plethora of employment and transition resources for individuals with disabilities. Visit the [Disability Hub website](https://disabilityhubmn.org/) to learn more. They have a great chat feature and a call-in number for anyone who has questions or is seeking specific resources.

[Youth in Transition Toolkit](https://disabilityhubmn.org/for-professionals/youth-in-transition/) – “This toolkit will introduce you to Minnesota's youth in transition framework. Explore tools and resources you can use with the youth you support to plan for their best lives.”

## APH

APH CareerConnect is “an employment information resource offered by the American Printing House for the Blind for job seekers who are blind or visually impaired. CareerConnect provides employment information, career exploration tools, and job-seeking guidance for individuals with vision loss and the professionals who work with them.” Visit their website at [aphcareerconnect.com](https://aphcareerconnect.org/) to learn more. Check out their new [*Getting Started Guides*](https://aphconnectcenter.org/familyconnect/getting-started-guides/)*,* featuring birth to 3rd grade and 4th to 12th grade guides for families. Archived APH webinars are available on the [APH ConnectCenter YouTube page.](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUj6DcM1nN3HCfWxJIMLPeD8roKZt8xyu)

## Blind Abilities Podcasts

Check out Blind Abilities on the web at <http://www.BlindAbilities.com>. You can also download the app from the Google Play store, or use the Blind Abilities Alexa skill on your Alexa device by saying, “Alexa, enable Blind Abilities.”

Here are some of the people and topics featured on Blind Abilities recently:

* Listen to a recap from SSB’s networking event at [Building Career Paths: Insights for Young Adults from SSB’s Student Career Networking Event](https://blindabilities.com/?p=8431)
* Learn about Interdependence in the episode: [Wellness Wednesday: Independence and Inter-dependence – Can They Exist Side by Side? Let’s Find Out](https://blindabilities.com/?p=8425)
* Hear from a former college student at [Crush Your College Goals: Jennifer Martinez-Badillo’s Story of Determination and Support from State Services for the Blind](https://blindabilities.com/?p=8410)
* Check out an episode on [Minnesota Wild Blind Hockey: Passion, Community, and Opportunities on the Ice and announcing a Career Networking Event for Blind Students](https://blindabilities.com/?p=8417)
* Learn about preparing for college and careers at [Preparing for Success: College and Career Insights for Blind and Low Vision Students – Meet Anjie Hall, an Expert in the Disabilities Resource Field](https://blindabilities.com/)

If you know a student interested in sharing their achievements, Blind Abilities would love to feature their perspectives. Send a note to <mailto:info@blindabilities.com>

## College Success Program

SSB is partnering with the College Success Program to offer mentorship, meet-ups, learning, and advocacy. Students finishing high school are paired with recent college graduates who are blind, low vision, or DeafBlind. Please email [shane.desantis@state.mn.us](mailto:shane.desantis@state.mn.us) with questions or to register.

## Website Updates

Check out [SSB’s Youth Services website](https://mn.gov/deed/ssb/teens/) to learn about upcoming events, access archived newsletters, read transition flyers, watch student videos, and more!

## Tech Tidbits

It's that time of year again. Sometime in November, or early December, Jaws, ZoomText, and Fusion will be releasing their major yearly updates. Version 2025 will soon be available for yearly subscribers, or users with current SMA licenses.

Freedom Scientific also has a new helpful AI tool called FS Companion. It is currently available directly through the Jaws 2025 beta, and through [www.fscompanion.ai](http://www.fscompanion.ai). This tool lets you search for how to do specific commands, or perform specific tasks. AI will respond with keyboard and screen reader accessible directions. FS Companion currently supports Jaws, but will soon also support ZoomText and Fusion. Users can also ask how to do tasks in Microsoft Office and the Google suite of apps.

Be My Eyes is now partnering with the Hilton line of hotels, and offers live support to hotel services and hotel staff through the Be My Eyes app. Download the Be My Eyes app for IOS and Android to try this and many other features, including the Be My AI feature, which gives detailed descriptions of images.

# Fast Forward: Potential and Possibilities

# Walter Waranka

Headshot of Walter Waranka smiling for the camera


I grew up in Milwaukee and attended the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped. After high school, I earned a BA in Mass Communications and Public Relations from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and later, I completed a Master’s in Religious Studies at Cardinal Stritch College. My career didn’t follow a straight path, though. I worked in telemarketing and in a production workshop early on, but eventually, I found myself working with inner-city youth as a youth and pastoral minister. That experience gave me a deep sense of purpose.

About 27 years ago, I moved to the Twin Cities to start fresh. I spent 26 years working as an Employment Specialist, helping people with disabilities and those on public assistance find and keep meaningful jobs. It was rewarding work, and I also got involved in advocacy along the way. I served on the State Services for the Blind Rehabilitation Council, was a past President of the Minnesota Chapter for the American Council of the Blind, past President of the Minnesota Job Placement and Development, and two-time past President of the Minnesota Rehabilitation Association.

I also got involved in my local community. I served as President of the Mayor’s Advisory Council for People with Disabilities in Saint Paul, coached people through the MS Society of Minnesota, and even consulted with the Science Museum of Minnesota to ensure their exhibits were accessible. I took part in planning for future transportation needs in Saint Paul and served on the board of Clouds in Water Zen Center.

I can attribute several things to my career path. One is being flexible and willing to change. I found change to be one of the hardest things for us to accept and deal with. I changed my career from what I was planning on doing with the degrees I was able to achieve. I even moved around to different places.

One of those changes was creating my own nonprofit, which lasted three years. Along the way, I found that having support and guidance from others helped a lot. I also developed a thicker skin, which helped me not let others knock me back with their comments. That was not easy to do. Throughout my various careers, I found that volunteering before taking on a career choice helped me take a different direction.

I also learned many ways to do my job, from reading large print to learning Braille over one summer. I was also one of the first to try to learn how to use an option to read print. I also went from a Braille writer to a typewriter to a computer. I also taught myself to use JAWS and eventually a touch screen with a reader. I will say I am in no way fluent in any of these programs and am still learning a lot as I go. I wish I had spent more time learning technology and interacting with many programs that have come my way.

Hopefully, you will be as lucky as I have been to work with a great company since I moved to the Twin Cities. They have accommodated me when JAWS did not work with their database. Developing a strong image of myself got me to where I am today. I did this by discovering my strengths and working on my weaknesses while becoming more confident with my disability. That is not to say I don’t have good and bad days regarding who I am and how I present myself. For me, I feel my blindness is a part of me, and when I interact with others, I am ready for whatever comes my way.  However, some things still do surprise me.

In closing, don’t hesitate to step out and try something new or different for yourself. The only way to grow and learn is to try something and see what happens. If it works, then celebrate your achievement. If it does not, just take time to understand what did not work and get right back out there. Take time to learn who you are and how you want to present yourself to the world, and then go do it. Be willing to grow and change along the way.

# Building BRIDGEs

Picture of a well-built and stylish bridge.
As students navigate the world of high school and begin thinking about the future, we offer services and resources that provide a foundation for success. Each of the core areas of our **BRIDGE** framework highlights an essential component that teenagers need in order to succeed after high school:

* **B**asic Skills
* **R**ole Models
* **I**nitiative
* **D**iscovery
* **G**oal Setting
* **E**xperiences

## In the News and miscellaneous resources

[4to24 App](https://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/consumers/4-24-app) Available for Apple and Android Devices: The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision out of Mississippi State University has created an app for students and parents. It aims to prepare youth for future employment and independence by providing targeted resources and suggesting age-appropriate activities to build skills and confidence.

[Beacon Stories: Inspirational Voices from the Fighting Blindness Community](https://www.fightingblindness.org/beacon-stories). “The Foundation Fighting Blindness is a beacon for those affected by blinding retinal diseases. With our Beacon Stories, we share individual’s journeys with their disease and how their drive fuels them to pursue their passions. Not only do we find their stories aspirational, we believe these individuals are true beacons of strength, champions of courage, and advocates for hope.”

When should vision loss be disclosed to an employer? Every situation is different, and here are three resources that can help you decide this question:

* American Printing House: [Disclosing Blindness/ Low Vision](https://aphconnectcenter.org/careerconnect/job-seekers/conducting-a-successful-job-search/disclosing-a-visual-impairment/)
* Job Accommodation Network: [Disability Disclosure](https://askjan.org/topics/Disability-Disclosure.cfm)
* National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision: [Who Needs to Know?: When and How to Disclose Vision Impairment](https://www.blind.msstate.edu/sites/www.blind.msstate.edu/files/2022-03/Who%20Needs%20to%20Know%20-%20Disclosing%20Your%20Vision%20Impairment.pdf)

School Accommodations for Higher Education: Check out this [ADA knowledge research](https://adata.org/research_brief/higher-education-and-ada) breif from the ADA National Network to learn more about transitioning from high school to college and considerations for inclusion in higher education.

Sam Seavey with The Blind Life. Sam has a website called [theblindlife.net/](mailto:theblindlife.net/) and a YouTube page, [youtube.com/@theblindlife](mailto:youtube.com/@theblindlife), where he engages in various topics about blindness. “With over 50,000 subscribers and over 700 informative videos, Sam helps people worldwide living with vision loss, offering tips for managing daily tasks, reviewing assistive devices, and hosting informative interviews with key stakeholders in the visually impaired community.”

## Ideas?

We are always looking for ideas you’d like to see featured in this newsletter. Please email [shane.desantis@state.mn.us](mailto:shane.desantis@state.mn.us) with any suggestions or brainstorms. ☺