

# The WhiteCane

The magazine of the Iowa Department for the Blind

## New Horizons



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IDB launches new intake process

Meet our new managers

Vocational Rehabilitation

Independent Living

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Special Edition 2014

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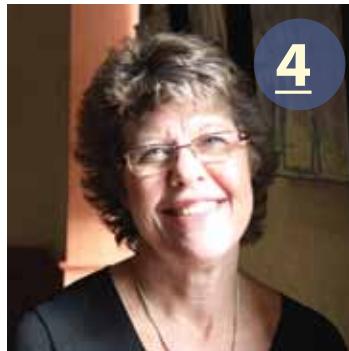
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## our mission

The Iowa Department for the Blind is the means for persons who are blind to obtain for themselves universal accessibility and full participation in society in whatever roles they may choose, including roles that improve Iowa's economic growth.

## our vision

It's okay to be blind.

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# |from the director

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**A**s philosophers from ancient to modern times have said repeatedly, change is the human constant, and the Iowa Department for the Blind has been undergoing change in recent years. In the pages of this White Cane Update, you will meet five new program managers at the Department who each brings a wealth of experience and a strength of dedication to their programs from which all blind Iowans will benefit.



I encourage you to meet these new managers in the following pages and to get to know them in person as well. Once you have met them and read an explanation of the Department's new intake process, I'll have a few concluding comments.

Sincerely,  
*Richard Sorey*

## IDB launches new intake process



Dee Martin, IDB's first intake specialist

The belief in the abilities of blind Iowans and the determination to support them to success in their lives are the hallmarks of the Iowa Department for the Blind's Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living programs. Part of the Department's focus on quality services is the willingness to assess and change how service delivery is handled and to improve it wherever possible. Two key factors in quality service are getting service to people when they request it and getting that service to them as quickly as possible. Failure to serve or to serve quickly is not quality service.

In fiscal year 2013, the Iowa Department for the Blind received 1,337 referrals. Only 14 percent, or 188 individuals, went on to apply for services from the Vocational Rehabilitation or Independent Living programs. The proportion of referrals actually applying for service was so small that the Department re-evaluated its referral and application process and has implemented a new strategy to increase the proportion of people who are referred and then actually receive services. Serving only 14 percent is far too low, and the statistics also showed that some potential clients were waiting months before they had the chance to apply for services.

In April of 2014, the Department hired Dee Martin as the new intake specialist. Martin's position is similar to that of a college admissions office or that of a first connection with any business. Martin's role is to assist individuals in easily finding the information they are seeking and the services they need as rapidly and efficiently as possible.

Martin receives all the referrals that come into the Department from a wide variety of sources. Martin contacts the people who have been referred to the Department and also assists individuals who walk into the agency to request services. Martin does her best to reach out to every new referral and share information about the Iowa Department for the Blind. If the person wants to apply for services after learning what is available, Martin works with the person to begin the process of applying for services.

Once the person applies for services, Martin explains that the counselor or teacher serving the area where the person lives will be contacting the applicant within a few weeks to assist in completing the application process.

During Martin's first five months performing this role, she received 456 referrals. Of these referrals, 54 percent, or 249 people, wanted to apply for services after hearing the explanation of what the Department could offer them. Of those applicants, 67 percent, or 186, have already been determined eligible for services. Of the other 33 percent, 10 percent decided not to pursue services or were determined to be ineligible and the remaining 23 percent are still working with a counselor or a teacher to determine eligibility. This means that in five months, using the new intake process, the number of blind Iowans applying for services with the Iowa Department for the Blind has nearly reached the number who applied in all of 2013.

This new position has allowed Iowa Department for the Blind counselors and teachers to do what they do best, which is to serve blind Iowans. The Department continues to evaluate the effectiveness of this process, receiving feedback from consumers and staff. To date, the statistics and feedback both show that people wanting to apply for services are being reached and served at a much faster pace.



Ann Fremont, IDB's new intake specialist

Dee Martin took on the intake job, knowing that she did not plan to remain permanently. She is concluding her service at the end of September, and Ann Fremont will be performing the intake specialist role. Ann is familiar to blind Iowans as she has been handling the Aids and Devices store in recent years and doing an outstanding job in that capacity. ♦

# Keri Osterhaus

Keri Osterhaus, Vocational Rehabilitation Program Director, loves having a job that allows her to make a difference in the lives of others. Osterhaus likes having plenty to do and has made a life habit of challenging herself to do more and to perform better. At the Iowa Department for the Blind she wants to provide that same opportunity to the staff and the clients with whom she works.

"I like to see the difference that we make in people's lives, the difference the counselors make in the lives of individuals," Osterhaus says of working with clients. "I like watching the growth that happens to an individual personally."

"I still remember the first transition program I was in, watching the students being led in on someone's arm, seeing them gaining skills over the summer, growing to be independent, and not needing that," Osterhaus continues. "I have high expectations of myself, and that translates into what I expect out of the counselors and out of the clients we serve."

"I want people to be self-reliant, successful, integrated into their communities, doing jobs they love, that they're passionate about," Osterhaus adds. "You have to have passion for your career or job if you're going to be successful. You have to have that passion to be able to go out and fight, push, advocate for yourself. The counselor's role is to help you gain that confidence."

"To be successful, you have to have that passion, that desire, coming from within, to be a part of something," Osterhaus

concludes. "With the transition kids, I remember their eyes starting to light up when they talked about a class or about doing something they do as a hobby. That can be a career direction for them to take. And it's the same with everybody. You have to find your passion."

Osterhaus found one of her passions early, a passion for always having something useful to do. She grew up in the tiny town of Pisgah and attended the West Harrison schools where she graduated in 1996 in a class of 32. Her father farmed, and her mother was director of nursing at a nursing home. During high school Osterhaus sang in the choir, played trumpet in the band, played volleyball and softball, was a cheerleader for three sports, danced on the pompon squad, and participated in National Honor Society and theater. Throughout this time, she also worked in the nursing home.

Osterhaus earned a Bachelor's degree in biology with minors in psychology and Japanese from Buena Vista University in 2000. Always interested in languages, she took French in high school and planned to continue in college. While in college, she met a student from Japan and ended up studying for a semester in Japan while earning her minor in the subject.

Osterhaus found time while in college to participate in choir and several campus clubs, to serve as a resident advisor in a dorm, to hold several jobs in Storm Lake in local restaurants, to work as a certified nursing assistant at the hospital, and to manage conferences on campus during summers.

# vocational rehabilitation

Osterhaus returned to Iowa Western to earn a two-year degree in sign language interpreting, planning to continue on for a nursing degree. She also continued to work, including positions at a department store, as a receptionist, and as a nursing assistant. As part of the degree program, she then landed an interpreting internship in Des Moines at Employee and Family Resources.

Through a professor she made a connection with the Iowa Department for the Blind where she was offered the opportunity to stay briefly as she transitioned to Des Moines. She found the work of the Orientation Center fascinating and she started learning that helping another person can lead to the person developing either independence or dependence, depending on how the help and support are provided.

As she was completing her Iowa Western degree in 2002, the Department was launching its summer transition program, and Osterhaus was employed in the program as a temporary employee. As she reached the maximum number of hours a temporary employee could work, a position at the Department as a project specialist came open, and Osterhaus was hired. She worked in both the transition and the community-based programs until 2003, when the Department received a five-year grant for transition-age programming. Osterhaus coordinated the mentoring program for blind youth in high school from 2003 to 2008 and then worked as a transition specialist with the same age group from 2008 to 2010.



Keri Osterhaus, Vocational Rehabilitation Program Director

In 2007 Osterhaus began studying at Drake University for a Master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, a program designed for those already working with classes on evenings and weekends. The program required an internship which she chose to do at Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Service (IVRS) to broaden her knowledge of disabilities. She notes that some Department clients have disabilities in addition to blindness, and she decided that she could bring a broader knowledge of disabilities to her Department work from an IVRS internship. To fit her job and internship in, she spread the work over two semesters, working 20 hours at the internship and often doing 12-hour days at the Department as well. She was awarded her Master's in 2011 and also earned her certification in vocational rehabilitation from the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification.

Osterhaus moved from the transition program to a position as a rehabilitation counselor in 2010

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# Kim Barber



Kim Barber, Program Manager for Independent Living

**K**im Barber, Program Manager for Independent Living, has brought a lifetime of helping others to her position at the Iowa Department for the Blind. She is working to focus independent living services where they are needed and to bring service quickly and efficiently to the many blind Iowans who seek the Department's services.

Barber is the eldest of four siblings. She says her father, an Air Force veteran who worked for John Deere of the Quad Cities, and her stay-at-home mother provided their children a strong foundation of Christian faith, love, family values, and a commitment of service to others.

Barber has always been a hard worker. In her teen years, her family lived on an Iowa farm. She raised and showed registered quarter horses, worked in the family garden, and helped with canning and other chores. She and her three siblings were active in 4H, and she enjoyed trail-riding with her friends. She was active in sports and in speech club. In high school, she was an

exchange student to the city of Saltillo in northeastern Mexico.

In 1988, Barber graduated from William Penn College and secured a job managing pre-vocational and vocational rehabilitation as well as physical and speech therapy programs with a community-based rehabilitation program. While employed she was approached by a professor from Drake University who encouraged her to apply to Drake's Vocational Rehabilitation program. She was accepted and graduated with a Master of Science degree.

Barber worked at the Iowa Department for the Blind as a vocational rehabilitation counselor from 2005 to 2007. She then moved to Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services where she worked with the Iowa Self-Employment Program (formerly Entrepreneurs with Disabilities). She provided expert business assessment, consultation and recommendations to help clients explore options for business start-up, acquisition, or enhancement.

Barber views her life work as helping people who want to improve the quality of their lives, both domestically and internationally. She was recognized by President Clinton and the U.S. Department of State for her contribution to elevating women in poverty in Tunisia, but she insists the honor belongs to those courageous poor women who took the steps necessary to change their lives.

Barber re-joined the staff of the Iowa Department for the Blind in September of 2013 to direct the Department's

# |independent living

Independent Living and Older Blind Program, working with seven regional rehabilitation teachers, a statewide project specialist, an intake coordinator, a deaf-blind specialist, and support staff to constantly improve blind Iowans' independence at home and in their communities. Since her arrival at the Department, Barber has evaluated each employee's performance, submitted timely reports to the Federal Government, negotiated with the Veterans Administration to provide CCTV training to their clients in Eastern Iowa, and visited support groups throughout the state to provide information and learn about members' needs. She has worked with her staff to plan community-based trainings, vision loss resource fairs, and senior orientation trainings. This year an intake coordinator was hired to aid rehabilitation teachers in timely determination of client eligibility within 60 days. Time-limited Independent Living services were eliminated, and the staff created and implemented a formal assessment tool for documenting clients' skills training needs and progress toward meeting those needs.

Over the next year, Barber has a number of goals for the Independent Living program. She plans to hire a rehabilitation technology specialist to provide training to Independent Living and Older Blind clients individually, through support groups, or in seminars; to work with other Department programs, statewide blindness groups, and others to revitalize the peer support volunteer project, connecting mentors with clients needing

mentoring; to tap into Independent Living Advisory Committee members' experience, knowledge, and community connections to enhance future plans and services; and to survey Older Blind clients to determine their need for education and training in additional areas.

Besides the joy of working for the Iowa Department for the Blind, Barber loves spending time with her husband, Michael, and her daughter, son-in-law, and three beautiful granddaughters. She is an advocate for a healthy lifestyle and teaches classes in the Des Moines YMCA system. ♦

# Sarah Willeford



Sarah Willeford, Program Manager of the Iowa Library for the Blind

Sarah Willeford, Program Manager of the Iowa Library for the Blind, found her calling in library science in graduate school. Her work in libraries has had two main focuses, serving library patrons and improving library service delivery systems. Elected by fellow librarians to serve as president of the Iowa Library Association this year, Willeford is looking forward to finding new ways to serve blind Iowans with better and innovative library services.

Competitive tennis was the hallmark of Willeford's youth in Omaha. Her father and grandfather owned a heating and air-conditioning company, and her mother owned and operated a certified public accountant firm. Grandparents, parents, Sarah and her sister all competed in tennis tournaments throughout the Midwest.

Willeford played on the Coe College tennis team where she earned a degree in 1996 in English with minors in writing and classical studies. She met her husband Chad, a Burlington native and a cross-country and track runner, at Coe, and the two were married in 1998.

Always a reader and writer, Willeford started graduate school at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), heading for a career in teaching English and found her calling in library science when she took courses in the subject as part of the Master's degree program. She credits a UNO professor with helping her find her calling to library science through discussions during which the two explored what Willeford truly loved doing.

"It was my place. It was where I should be," she says of library science.

Willeford earned a Bachelor's in library science at UNO, married Chad, moved to Clarinda and began work at the Clarinda Public Library, all in 1998. Chad accepted positions teaching high school art and coaching track in the Clarinda schools, and the couple's son, Connor, was born in 1999.

Willeford was the technology coordinator at the Clarinda library for three years while she earned her Master's in library science from Emporia State University in Kansas in a program designed for people working full-time who could study on-line and meet in person on weekends. She was awarded her Master's in 2001 and became director of the Clarinda library. She directed the library until 2007, automating the circulation system and steering the building of a new \$2.1 million, 13,000-square-foot library to completion. Sarah and Chad's daughter Gwen joined the family in 2005.

Another mentor, this one a consultant to the Clarinda library, encouraged Willeford to broaden her horizon from one library

to all Iowa libraries by drawing her into participation in the Iowa Library Association (ILA). Willeford volunteered for ILA positions and served for three years as chair of the association's government affairs committee, working with Iowa legislators on the re-organization of state library services. She was then elected to a series of statewide ILA offices, culminating in the presidency in 2014.

In 2007 Chad was recruited by the Southeast Polk school district to coach girls track and to teach high school art, and the family moved to Pleasant Hill on Des Moines' eastern edge. Willeford became a consultant with the Central Iowa Library Service Area, helping 80 libraries in ten Central Iowa counties with their plans for renovation and other service enhancements. The entity was also part of the statewide consortium that made downloadable audio books and the full text of articles available to libraries statewide.

Willeford enjoyed providing advice to libraries but missed the direct service to members of the public she had provided in Clarinda. In 2009 she became assistant director of the Ankeny Public Library and, a year later, director. She describes the Ankeny library as "amazingly busy," serving 50,000 people with both staff members and a large cadre of dedicated volunteers. Those included both adults and teens who devoted time and expertise to creating a wide variety of programming, she says, including the recent addition of a "maker space" with a 3-D printer, video recording and editing equipment, and a sewing machine, all for public use free of charge.

Willeford served as director in Ankeny for three years before deciding to try another new challenge, servicing library patrons who are blind.

"What has always been the core of what I love about libraries is access to information for all," Willeford says. "I wanted to be able to continue to develop that piece. That's what drew me to this position, the ability to make sure that all information is accessible to our patrons and the opportunity to work with our community on how they need information."

Willeford says she "loves to learn" and has been applying that skill to learning about Braille and audio production and how a library for the blind circulates its books and magazines to its patrons, a system very different in detail from the public libraries serving sighted patrons she has headed.

Willeford hopes to bring new services and ways of serving to the Iowa Library for the Blind, starting with the re-establishment of a front desk to serve those who visit the library in person. She is working with a team drawn from all parts of the Department to brainstorm what additional services and directions the library can adopt. The resource center near the front desk is one focus of that brainstorming.

The resource center already has a computer equipped with JAWS, a Braille display and enlarging software. One of Willeford's goals is to add smaller devices like iPads that patrons can experiment with and learn to use. Once goals for the resource center are

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# A message from Sarah Willeford

The Iowa Library for the Blind, as everyone knows, is a unique institution. While we do have some print materials, the vast majority of our collections are in Braille, audio, and large print. We serve most of our patrons by mail, phone, and internet. Unlike libraries in home towns, our patrons rarely visit us in person.

Our most important function is to serve our patrons, wherever they live, with the books and other information they seek. But we never want to be an unwelcoming or uninteresting place for those who do step through our doors. In fact we want to increase those visits and serve patrons in person as often as is convenient for them.

I have directed two local libraries and also served as a consultant to many more.

I confess I was disappointed and puzzled when I arrived at the Iowa Library for the Blind to find that it did not even have a front desk from which to greet and serve walk-in patrons. One of my first changes was to re-organize the entry to re-establish a front desk. When patrons visit, they are now welcomed, and their requests are the top priority of the staff member at the desk.

The area near the library's front desk on the fourth floor has been further re-organized to allow for shelving of new books and shelving of featured topics. We will have the very latest arrivals in Braille, large print and audio books for patrons to browse when

they visit. We will also feature a subject area on nearby shelves with the display to be changed several times during the year. The first subject area to be featured will be cookbooks.

I would like to make two points about the library's Braille stacks. The first is that patrons who come personally to the library can visit the Braille stacks if they wish. Since we are in a state building, we do need to keep track of who is in the building, so those visiting the stacks need to check in and out with the library's front desk. We continue to have Orientation Center students visiting the stacks on travel lessons, and patrons visiting the library are welcome to go into the Braille stacks to browse for books if they wish.



The second point is that the Braille stacks are currently not organized for easy browsing. In 2003 the decision was made to shelf Braille books in the order they were acquired by the library. This unfortunately means that books on the same topic or by the same author can be scattered throughout the building.

Braille is shelved in ten different rooms or areas throughout the building. For example, consulting our catalog reveals that cookbooks providing dessert recipes can be found in six of those ten areas, and books by the popular fiction author John Grisham can be found in five of the ten areas. In other words, shelving books by the date they were acquired leads to stacks with non-fiction

mixed in with fiction, children's books mixed in with adult books, and no consistency on where a topic or an author's books can be found.

Public libraries typically shelve fiction alphabetically by the author's last name and shelve non-fiction according to the Dewey Decimal system or some other system which groups books on the same topic together. We at the library are studying the way the Braille stacks are currently organized to consider alternatives, and we are offering walk-in patrons those shelves of new books and of books on a specific topic as one way to make browsing easier and pleasant.

Another "must" that makes a library easy for its patrons to use is a catalog that is easy to use. Patrons can browse a catalog for author or subject and decide which books they want if the catalog is easy to use. Unfortunately the Iowa Library for the Blind's catalog is not easy for either staff or patrons to use, and getting a different catalog easy for all to use is a top priority of mine.

Another feature of our library for walk-in patrons is the resource room near the front desk. The room is being developed to include computers with JAWS, print enlargement and Braille output so patrons can use the computer like public access computers in hometown libraries or can experiment with forms of output with which they are not familiar. We are also brainstorming in the library and soliciting suggestions about what else might be offered in the resource room. For example,

we are considering having smaller devices like iPads available for experimentation. Once we decide what to add to the resource room, we will begin exploring financial options to make the concepts into reality.

Our patrons may be interested in some library statistics. Our Braille collection currently includes over 29,000 titles in a total of over 93,000 Braille volumes. Our digital collection currently has over 13,500 titles consisting of over 50,000 digital book volumes. In 2013 over 3,800 Braille titles and over 179,000 audio titles, both Digital and Cassette, were checked out by library patrons.

The Iowa Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped is committed to providing access to information for all patrons. I look forward to continuing to work to improve and advance our library services, our collection and our library space, working in partnership with Department staff and the thousands of blind Iowans who look to us for books and information in alternative media. ♦

# Shawn Mayo

**S**hawn Mayo, Program Manager of the Orientation and Adjustment Center, brings with her to the position a habit of hard work, a deep understanding of blindness rooted in her own experiences as a blind person, and a nationally-known record of opening doors to independence for blind people from across America and around the world.

Mayo was born on an Air Force base in Mississippi and raised outside of St. Louis, Missouri. By age 13, she had made America's favorite summer pastime her own personal passion, setting up tables at baseball card shows, and paying her little brother and sister to write letters to baseball stars requesting autographs.

During summers between high school years, Mayo regularly attended games of her team, the St. Louis Cardinals, and stayed after the games to meet players and get their pictures, some with her by the player. One of her best memories is having met Hall of Fame shortstop Ozzie Smith who gave her an autographed bat.

She went to work for a local baseball card shop for a couple of years before getting a job as a veterinary assistant in high school. Her own hard work earned her enough money to buy her own horse, and she was awarded a scholarship that would allow her to begin veterinary school at the University of Illinois after only three years of undergraduate work.

During her senior year of high school, Mayo was diagnosed with leukemia. She spent the next three years undergoing treatment

for leukemia. Not content to get behind peers in acquiring a college education, she took classes at her local community college while battling the leukemia.

But Mayo, though she did not fully understand it at the time, also had blindness to handle. The combination of leukemia and diabetes caused her to lose most of her eyesight. At the end of her battle with leukemia she had restored good health and virtually no vision.

Mayo's cancer yielded to treatment, going into remission. Her experience fighting cancer and the effects of cancer treatment made her passionate about helping children dealing with cancer and also ignited an interest in psychology. She decided to finish her bachelor's degree in psychology at Bradley University in Illinois.

Once the cancer subsided, Mayo had to come to terms with her blindness. Like many people dealing poorly with blindness, her initial assumption was that she was lacking in capacity due to lack of eyesight. Like many people dealing poorly with blindness, she decided that the world around her should be changed to accommodate what she saw as her deficiencies.

Mayo started a disability support group on the Bradley campus and lobbied the administration to paint the steps yellow on each stairway outside of all of the buildings where she had classes that semester so she could see the steps and not have to use a cane.

# orientation center



Shawn Mayo, Program Manager of the Orientation and Adjustment Center

She discovered the flaw inherent in that solution the next semester when her classes were held in different buildings without yellow steps. She realized she did not yet have any way to handle blindness in every situation that life might throw at her.

In 1994, Mayo was awarded a scholarship by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) which came with a trip to the NFB's week-long national convention. This experience changed her understanding of blindness completely. She saw people traveling confidently and independently wherever they wanted to go, using long white canes. She found mentors who challenged her beliefs about her own lowered capacity. They showed her how she could become confident and independent herself. She learned that the world didn't need to change for her and learned that she had the ability within herself to change.

After a protracted battle with the vocational rehabilitation agency in Illinois, Mayo attended BLIND, Inc. in Minneapolis in 1996. There she had the time and

opportunity to develop the skills of blindness, build her self-confidence, and really come to understand that blindness should not dictate the terms of her life.

After completing her blindness training, Mayo moved to Missouri to complete her masters degree in psychology at Missouri State University. She took a full load of courses and worked as a research assistant. She became president of the National Association of Blind Students, a division of the NFB. She strengthened the organization, revived the newsletter, and started a discussion list serv. She enjoyed this building process and making a difference in the lives of blind students.

When she finished graduate school, she had several job offers. She chose to become the Assistant Director of Marketing and Outreach for BLIND, Inc. The training she received at BLIND had made such an extraordinary impact on her life, and she wanted to provide other blind people with the opportunity to achieve that same independence.

When the previous director, Joyce Scanlan, retired in 2003, Mayo took over as Executive Director. While BLIND was a solid organization, Mayo knew that training centers, like people, need to continue to grow, challenge themselves, and strive to improve. She understood that organizations which do not constantly seek to better themselves risk becoming dogmatic, unenthusiastic, and technologically out of date.

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Mayo actively recruited new, energetic staff who had high expectations for their students. She encouraged innovation, improvements in technology and curriculum, and development of new programs. She oversaw the creation of a program for English Language Learners that taught Braille and English to blind immigrants. She increased both the program's revenue and the number of students served.

In the decade Mayo directed programs at BLIND, more than 80 percent of the students who graduated from the program went successfully to work or went successfully to college and then to work. Her years of experience at BLIND taught her how to teach and motivate both students and staff to work together as a team to open those doors of opportunity for blind people. She is proud and pleased that most of the students who completed the BLIND program learned not only the blindness skills they need for success, but also learned and internalized the key lesson she learned about blindness; that others can help to open doors and provide opportunity, but only the blind person himself or herself can make that opportunity into success. Her own life and the lives of most students she has taught prove that the lessons are true, can be taught, and can be learned.

Mayo is excited to bring her experience and values to the Iowa Department for the Blind's Orientation and Adjustment Center. She views the opportunity to lead such a historic program as a great opportunity and challenge. Many NFB leaders she knows and admires grew up in Iowa and were trained at the center by its founder, Kenneth

Jernigan. During her early years in the NFB she came to know Dr. Jernigan and had the benefit of learning from him in the final years of his life.

Mayo believes that the best way to honor the history of the training center is to focus on the present and build for the future. To honor the memory of Dr. Jernigan and to keep opening doors for those like her who confront blindness and need a training center to do so successfully, she is determined to build, to improve, and to keep opening doors for other blind people as both Dr. Jernigan and the staff at BLIND once did for her. ♦



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settled on, she says the next step will be finding funding to implement the additions.

Other goals Willeford lists for the library are a new automation system that is easy for both staff and patrons to use and forging relationships with public libraries around the state. She points out that public libraries can serve two roles for blind patrons.

One is connecting those patrons with the Iowa Library for the Blind's resources in alternative media. The other is partnering with the Iowa Library for the Blind to make local programming in public libraries around the state accessible to blind patrons in their own home communities. Willeford would like to work on both.

When not doing library work, Willeford likes to garden. Chad likes to cook, she adds,

including experimenting with vegetables she grows. Willeford is a huge Harry Potter and Dr. Who fan and loves mysteries, a taste she shares with her grandmother. Her current favorite mystery writer is a Norwegian, Joe Nesbo, and she and her grandmother are always happy to receive recommendations from fellow readers.

Connor, now a high school freshman, is following in his father's footsteps, running track, and Gwen, now a fourth grader, is enjoying participating in small productions at the Des Moines Playhouse. The family also includes a long-haired dachshund names Sitsie, a hermit crab named Bruce, and a guinea pig named Hugo. ♦



# Emily Wharton

Emily Wharton says she is somewhere between a dilettante and a polymath. Many topics fascinate her including Eastern philosophy, baseball, poetry, gaming, and computers, but what she really loves is making and doing things.

Wharton has done a Master of Fine Arts in writing and has made a Braille teaching methodology. She has done network administration and made a website. She has done rehab teaching and made curriculum and syllabi for teaching assistive technology. These things were all challenging and enjoyable in their time, but Wharton says she is always much more interested in what she is making and doing now and what she will make and do in the future.

As Wharton told the students in a business class in the Orientation Center a few months ago, blindness doesn't really interest her anymore. She cares a great deal about blind people, but blindness itself is something she really doesn't think much about these days.

However, twenty years ago when she was leaving her tiny northwest Iowa home town of Aurelia to start college at Drake University in the big city of Des Moines, blindness consumed most of her mental energy. She had no non-visual alternative techniques and no belief that her "visual impairment" could be anything but a constant, exhausting struggle. It would take her four times longer to read her textbooks, and she had to run all of her errands and eat her meals during daylight hours because she could not go anywhere alone after dark.



Emily Wharton, Technology Director

She felt as though her time, energy, and circumstances would be forever limited by her inability to "see normally" and that there was nothing she could do to change this. She started to look for ways to mitigate the catastrophe and wrote her rehab counselor a letter asking for help getting around. Her counselor, Crystal Stanley, showed up with an Iowa cane that Wharton could have for free and a folding cane that she would need to pay \$16.50 to purchase. Wharton ran back to her dorm to get her checkbook to buy the folding cane.

As she then thought, she wasn't blind. She just couldn't see that well, or if she was blind, she wasn't blind all the time. After embarrassing herself by stumbling through a poetry reading where she could not make out the 16 point font document three inches from her nose, she told her rehab counselor that she wanted to learn Braille, and a teacher was sent to her apartment once a month. While starting to learn these skills made life a little more manageable, the sadness and frustration continued to grow.

Stanley eventually convinced Wharton to take a tour of the Iowa Department for the Blind. This was the first time Wharton had ever met a blind person. Much to her surprise, the blind people she met did not seem to have the same anxiety and shame that she had about blindness. Wharton decided to finish college a semester early and go to training at the Department's Orientation Center before starting graduate school.

Wharton recalls she was a difficult student at the training center. She started out knowing that she would have a big advantage because she really could see quite a bit. She acted as if she knew everything, argued in business class, lifted her shades in travel class, refused to listen to recorded computer tutorials, and showed little interest in following recipes.

Eventually she worked through the fear and frustration and stopped lifting her shades. Completing her five-mile walk ended up being one of her proudest achievements to this day. She read "Jazz" by Toni Morrison in Braille and learned to love Braille.

But more important than the skills to Wharton was the opportunity to work through all of her misconceptions and come to realize that blindness didn't have to control her life. She felt light-hearted and truly hopeful about her future for the first time in her life.

This knowledge gave Wharton so much peace and relief that she became very

passionate about wanting to help other blind people find it for themselves. This led her to take a job teaching at BLIND, Inc. in Minneapolis. Over the next fifteen years, she taught cane travel, daily living skills, computers, Braille, and career exploration. While seeing her students succeed made her happy, it was always very important to her that she impress upon the students that their success belonged to them and not to her or any of the other training center teachers. The most important thing she learned about teaching is that a teacher's real job is to make herself unnecessary.

Wharton's drive to make and to do led her to curriculum development, website building, audio production, staff training, and network administration. When the position of Technology Director opened up at the Iowa Department for the Blind, it felt to her like a perfect fit. She knew she could draw on her wide range of past experiences in making and doing while making and doing new things.

Wharton is now working on the twin goals of building a strong team of talented people dedicated to insuring that the technical infrastructure of the department functions so well it goes unnoticed and that blind Iowans receive the assistive technology and skills training they need to be successful and independent. There is so much to make and do, and Wharton is excited by the challenge. ♦

# director's outlook

## Change is the constant

We at the Iowa Department for the Blind face a number of challenges which I am anxious to meet and overcome with the help of our strong management team and the support of blind Iowans.

We need to convert the Library to a new database system that will be easier and more efficient for staff and patrons to use. This will improve the services we provide readers.

We must place more emphasis on technology skills by providing clients more and better training. Since technology is the “window to opportunity”, we cannot hope to present clients who are fully qualified candidates for competitive employment unless they are experts in the latest technology.

We must actively partner with employers, health care providers, school systems, colleges, public libraries, other state agencies, and community resources so that they learn about our services and so our clients will learn about the full range of assistance that’s available where they live.

We need to continue to prioritize outreach activities in order to develop and sustain mutually beneficial partnerships with other entities.

Clients who have secondary disabilities deserve to have all of their needs met, and we have not adequately done this in the past. In the future we must focus on the entire client rather than only the client who is blind.

Our older blind Iowans also deserve exemplary services, and we have implemented a comprehensive service model for each of them that includes a formal needs assessment as well as comprehensive training for those who wish to receive it. We will increase the number of senior orientations at the orientation center, and we will offer more community-based training sessions around the state which will include technology training since age does not limit the need to use technology in today’s environment.

Career assessment and career counseling will be normal practice for many vocational rehabilitation cases to ensure the wisest use of resources and detailed attention to client wishes, goals, needs, and abilities. We will create more self-employment opportunities for those clients who wish to work for themselves by providing the necessary training and development to enable them to begin their own businesses and keep them solvent.

We now complete performance evaluations for all employees annually and will continue to do so. This will guarantee everyone’s best efforts at work, regardless of their specific duties, and everyone, staff, consumers, legislators, and the public, will reap the benefits of an enthusiastic and forward-looking workplace culture.

That’s an ambitious program, and the agency administration, with the help of the management team and entire staff, intends to lead the Department into a new era of accountability and customer satisfaction.



Let me add a quick note about the negativity and criticism that some blind Iowans are hearing from a handful of people, mostly former staff who have declared themselves unhappy with the changes at the Department.

Change itself can be uncomfortable for some people, especially people who believe, as this handful of critics do, that their work was so good it did not need improving. I would only note that anyone can always improve, and I insist that, however good the Department was in the past, it can be better.

Many have noticed that this handful of critics devotes a lot of energy to criticizing, but the criticism is always broad and biting

without ever being specific. I want change that brings improved services and improved lives for blind people, not a return to the recent past in which staff members assured each other how wonderful the agency was while outcomes for clients declined year after year. And I want change that responds to specific needs, not to generalized dissatisfaction that never gets specific.

I invite all blind Iowans to join with me and our program managers to invigorate and enliven the Department and, by doing so, to serve all blind Iowans in the way that achieves success for each. That's our job, and I'm sure that, with your help, we can do it. ♦

| Continued from Page 7 |

and performed that work until early 2014 when she became program manager.

"I wanted to see positive change at the agency," says Osterhaus of her new position. "I knew that changes were happening, and I wanted to be able to be a part of that and to help direct the agency as we move forward."

Osterhaus has also earned the National Orientation and Mobility Certification from the National Blindness Professional Certification Board and is just completing a one-year certificate program through the University of Maryland for people who already have a Master's degree but want additional graduate work in the area of career planning and placement. The program focuses on youth in transition, she says, but the techniques apply to all clients.

Osterhaus lists several goals that she is working on as Vocational Rehabilitation Program Director. One is working in

partnership with the Orientation Center to insure that clients receive the benefits of both programs. Another is working with Vocational Rehabilitation counselors who are defining goals to improve as counselors. The staff-chosen goals include how to better manage case loads and how to better partner with the communities the counselors serve.

Those staff goals also include building better partnerships with and being better resources to Iowa businesses and better collaboration within the Department with rehabilitation teachers, rehabilitation technology specialists, and library staff.

Osterhaus married Terry Osterhaus in 2008. Terry was a counselor at the Department from 2004 to 2014. The couple has a three-year-old son, Brody, and Terry now manages rental property the family owns. ♦



# NOTES

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## **Commission for the Blind**

Peggy Elliott, Commission Chair

Sandra Ryan, Member

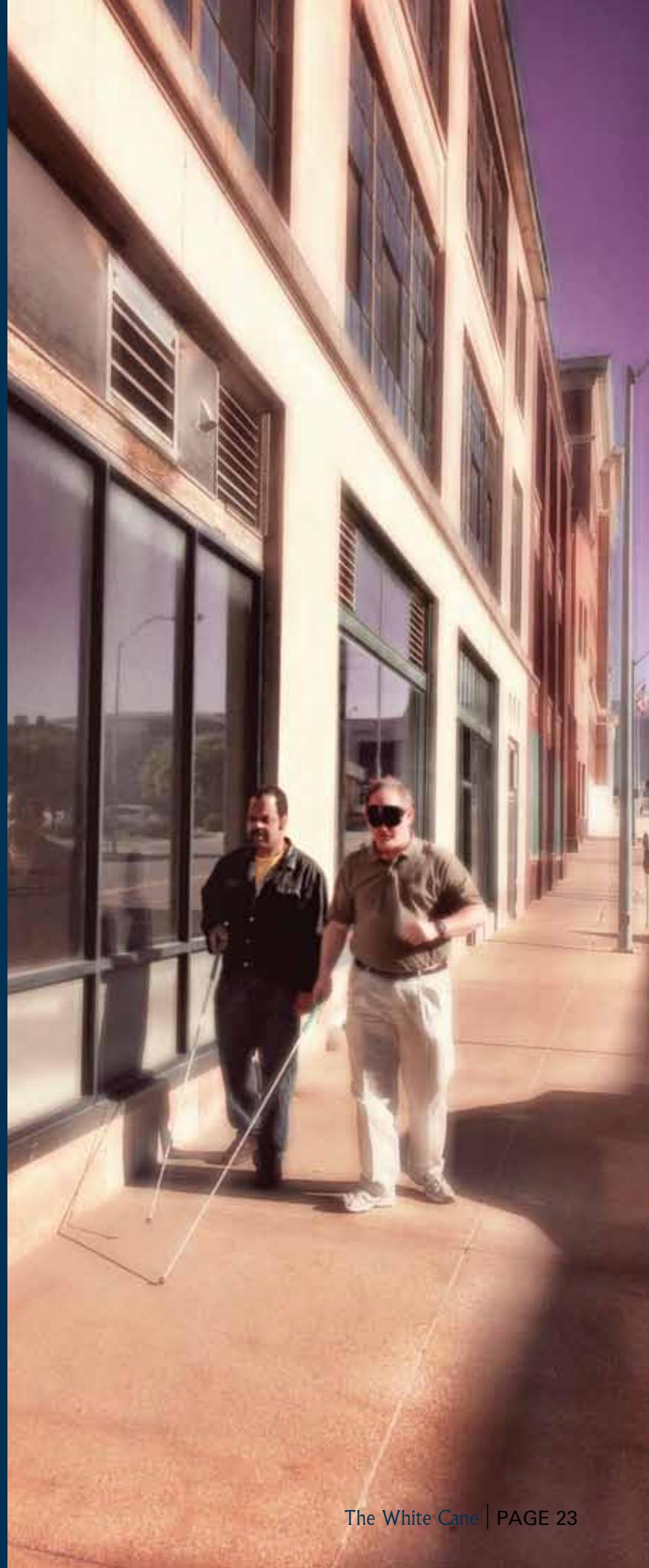
Joe Van Lent, Member

## **Mission:**

The Iowa Department for the Blind is the means for persons who are blind to obtain for themselves universal accessibility and full participation in society in whatever roles they may choose, including roles that improve Iowa's economic growth.

- We would love to come speak about blindness at your club or organization's next meeting.
- We also provide training workshops on blindness at your school or office.
- If you have never seen our building and want to learn more about our services and what we provide in our building, we'd love to give you a tour.

Email us at [information@blind.state.ia.us](mailto:information@blind.state.ia.us) or call us at (800) 362-2587 for more information.



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