**February 2023 Newsletter**

**ExpressVote XL, Accessible, Independent Voting System**
Written by Judy Wieber

On Thursday, December 1st 2022, SILO began it’s first of four voting machine evaluations. In an effort to help New York State Board of Elections, select SILO consumers, staff and board members were granted the opportunity to try out the ExpressVote XL Election Systems & Software Voting Machine. The goal was to discern the most accessible and user-friendly device.

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The ExpressVote XL ES&S machine has many likeable features. It came with a headset, Accessible Tactile Interface (ATI) and screen-reading software for the visually impaired and print impaired voter. It has the ability to change the size of the print, as well as the contrast for low vision users, and an accessible Sip and Puff interface for a voter who cannot use their hands to cast their vote. This machine is at a lower height, so one can sit while voting.

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Another feature is that, when casting a vote, the ballot is marked with integrated thermal printing - no ink is involved, preventing smearing or other marking-related errors. It is then dropped right into the ballot casting box, as opposed to printing the ballot and then carrying it to the box. The only population of voters this ES& S machine does not take into consideration is those who are both deaf and blind.

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Stay focused on our newsletter, as we evaluate other machines in the future.

  

**Interview with SILO’s Board President, Mary Ann Sciacca**
Written by Judy Wieber

After interviewing Mary Ann Sciacca, Board Chair, I would describe her as a true public servant. Mary Ann is an extraordinarily strong, confident, independent, self-made woman, working 35 years for Suffolk County’s Public Works and Building and Grounds Department, and chairing numerous committees of and for people with disabilities.

A Deer Park resident since the age of fifteen, Mary Ann had to attend Walt Whitman High School in Huntington Station, because in the 1960s, Deer Park High School was not wheelchair accessible. Even Walt Whitman had its limitations. Though Mary Ann could have access to her core subjects and business classes on the buildings ground level, college prep courses were only offered on an inaccessible lower level. "I am happy to see that today, schools have ramps and elevators, but back in the late 60’s and 70’s, these adaptations did not exist.  Going to college was something I always wanted to do but could not because the college prep courses were given on the lower level.”

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Working for SMS Instruments for five years and then attending business school for two years, Mary Ann then decided to involve herself with the Architectural Barriers Committee of Suffolk. She not only attended, but later came to chair the committee. It is here where she developed a connection with a person who worked for the Suffolk County Department of Labor. Little did she know, this decision to be an active volunteer, would lead to a 35-year career with the county.

Once employed, Mary Ann was able to go back to school at night.

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A College reimbursement program offered through her job, allowed her to take work related courses, and it also provided funds, 75% reimbursement. Graduating from both Suffolk County Community College and Adelphi College, Mary Ann received a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work. “At that time, Adelphi offered an Able program, where I would meet with the head of the Social Work Department. I was given five questions I had to answer in-depth essay paper, more like a thesis paper. It took me a couple of years to complete.”

Her employment in the Building and Grounds Division started as a temporary Clerk Typist, which then became permanent, advancing to Steno, then Principal Clerk, all while taking college courses in the evening.  Working in the County gave her an opportunity to speak to the Commissioner regarding the inaccessibility of the County buildings. “I helped to get Suffolk County legislation passed, making County buildings more accessible. At one point the architects would take me to Riverhead and Yaphank, to show me the buildings. When they would make them accessible, they would use me to see how I would manage.”

Coincidentally, the Human Rights Commission of Suffolk was in the same building as the Building and Grounds Department. One day a Human Rights investigator, aware of her involvement with different accessibility groups, came to ask Mary Ann if she would mind being a test case, because people with disabilities were not considered under the human rights laws of the early 70s. Shocked to learn this, Mary Ann agreed to do what she could to help.  An investigator and photographer were then assigned to Mary Ann, travelling to five different shopping centers in her hometown area. In fact, a 1976 article written in The New York Times, features Mary Ann and the different architectural barriers she encounters on her daily routine. Pointing out the “unnecessary barriers,” the article served to shed light on the life of a person using a wheelchair.

At that time, shopping cart corrals were commonly found in front of the doors of a store, installed to gather up and prevent carts from leaving the parking lot, but they prevented people using wheelchairs from shopping. Mary Ann, though very aware of the inequalities already existing in the laws and in the way people would treat a person, found the experience to be a very “eye opening” one. Store managers wanted to know why she would want to go into the store anyway, or did not she have someone who could do the shopping for her?  As a result of the investigation, a formal complaint was made by Mary Ann at the State Human Rights Commission. A stressful, and frustrating five-year human rights case ensued. By the time the case was settled in Mary Ann’s favor, three of the five stores had gone out of business.

Winning this case, Mary Ann claims to be one of her proudest accomplishments. “It is one thing to sit and complain, but it is another to actively do something.”

In fact, looking back over her years of life experiences, the advice she would give is to be as involved as you can be.

The work and the voice she used to help pave for self-advocacy, and younger generations of people with disabilities living on Long Island is commendable. She has helped to shape new attitudes and elevate awareness, making it easier for others to find their voice and spirit of determination. When one is not afraid to stand up for civil injustice, it makes the path easier for others not to have to scream and shout, but educate and listen with compassion and understanding.

Now retired, Mary Ann is still fighting the good fight, motivated to pursue knocking down barriers found in the health care system. She is still dedicated to vigilantly watching, and maintaining the rights already achieved, while guiding SILO’S Board.

When asked what some of the things are that she likes to do for enjoyment, Mary Ann responded: “I like to read, go to the movies, local shows, shopping at the outlets, and taking strolls down at the beach.

Mary Ann credits her mom for her spirit of determination. “My mother never babied me, . . . she was tough.”  Meeting other people with disabilities also helped. In fact, the first physical therapist Mary Ann went to when she first contracted Polio at 11 years old, was disabled.  “He himself had Polio and I thought: Wow, if this guy can do it, than so can I!”



**Movie Review: Devotion**
Written by Judy Wieber

Considering February being Black History month, my must-see movie pick for the month of February is Devotion. The movie stars Johnathan Majors as Navy Hero, Jessie Brown. Majors does an excellent job portraying the true-life story of the first African-American Naval Aviator, recipient of the prestigious Flying Cross and Medal of Honor.

It is a beautiful story of love and devotion of oneself and ability, one’s need to fly, one’s love of wife and family, and one’s love of fellow man. It is not a wonder as to why Jake Crane, and Johnathan Stewart’s story, now airing on Netflix, gets five stars.

Jessie Brown passed away December 4, 1950, after his “Corsair” aircraft was shot down, the officer crash landed over military lines. Valiantly holding back the enemy at the Chosin Reservoir, Brown’s fuel tank was hit. The blow causing his fighter to descend. His wing man, Lieutenant Tom Hudnor, also received the Medal of honor for his attempt, against all odds, to rescue him.

**About Barry Rosenthal, SILO’s Newest Board Member**
Written by Krista Giannak

For 29 years, Barry Rosenthal worked as a high school Culinary Arts teacher for special needs students. His mission was “to inspire students to exceed expectations of themselves.” Additionally, he taught adult education and served as department chair for 15 years.

Barry holds a Master’s degree in reading and special education from Dowling College. Currently, he lives with his wife of over 38 years, along with “2 dogs, 1 cat and approximately 30 squirrels that reside in the backyard.”

**Q&A**

**Q: Why cooking?**

A: "My grandparents had a restaurant in Norwalk, CT. I think, at one time, it might have been a horse-drawn cart. It was a small diner. I just always liked to cook. My brother and I cooked for ourselves from an early age."

**Q: What got you started cooking professionally?**

A: "I started out as a dish washer at a little restaurant attached to a department store. One day,  the cook quit. She just walked out, and the manager was trying to prepare food. I helped him out, and he said, ‘Do you want to be a cook?’ I said ‘Sure.’ I liked the adrenaline rush, and it’s satisfying to cook for other people.”

**Q: How did you get to be a good cook?**

A: “I made a lot of mistakes. I believe you learn more from things that go wrong. When things go right, you don’t really give it a second thought. At work, most of my training was on-the-job training.”

**Q: How did you get into special education?**

A: “I was working at a family catering restaurant. There were a lot of people working weekends, and most of them were younger than me. One of the repairmen saw me working with these kids, and he was a teacher himself at BOCES. He said, ‘You’d be a great teacher.’ I said, ‘Really? That’s funny. I went to college for that, but at the time, there were no teaching jobs.’ He told me about an opening in his building and suggested that I apply. I had to go back to school to get certified in Career and Technical Education – a two-year program at New York Tech in Central Islip and Westbury.”

“I had 20 years of cooking experience before I started teaching. In Career and Tech Education, you don’t need special certification to work with special ed students. I got an offer from a principal, and I didn’t know anything about it. He said, ‘Why don’t you come and look, and then you can decide for yourself.’ I went up to Carl Place, and they were very nice kids, and they were working. I said, ‘I can do that.’”

**Q: How did you meet Joe Delgado?**

A: “When I went over to Eastern Suffolk BOCES, the assistant principal there was Joe Delgado. He was a man of his word, and I really liked him because he always put the interests of his students first. If I’d suggest anything he thought the students would benefit from, he’d say, ‘Fine. Do it.’”

**Q: Why the SILO board?**

A: “I was looking for an opportunity to give back to the community. I knew both Joe Delgado and Brian McIlvain from BOCES. When I came to Joe a few months ago, and he showed me around the facility, I was very impressed with the broad range of services SILO provides. BOCES and the districts provide a lot of support for students and their families. Then, the students turn 21, and the bottom drops out… There are services, but you have to know how to obtain them. That’s one thing that Brian McIlvain is very good at. It’s the missing link in services for disabled students. That’s what drew me to SILO. I thought it was a worthy way to give back to the community.”

**Q: Do you have any fun stories to share?**

1. “The last cooking job I had, the family-owned catering business… I interviewed with the husband and wife who owned the business. They called me back for the second interview and said, ‘We really like you, but there’s something bothering us… You’re kind of thin, and we were told never to trust a thin chef.’ I said… ‘Let me cook for you, invite some friends, and if you like what I made, you can hire me. If you don’t like it, then we’ll both be satisfied that we made the right choice.’ I pulled out all the stops with beef Wellington and Italian wedding soup. They hired me, and I worked there for three years until the BOCES teaching opportunity came along.”

“Sometimes, you have to take a step back to move forward. It was probably my first or second day in special ed… I had a boy in my class with a number of disabilities. He was the nicest kid, and I learned from him not to assume anything. He was one of twelve students in the class, and I asked him, ‘Do you know how to peal a carrot?’ He didn’t, so I taught him. I gave him five pounds of carrots to peal, and I went to attend to other students. When I came back, I asked, ‘Where are the carrots?’ He gestured and said, ‘Here!’ I never told him when to stop, so he kept pealing and pealing and pealing, until he had a big pile of shavings… so I said, ‘OK, now, we’re going to make carrot cake.’ That was my experience; you get what you ask for



 **Affordable, Accessible Housing for Veterans and Individuals with Disabilities**
Written by Judy Wieber

After SILO showed support of bills IR 1839 and 1840, both bills passed unanimously on December 21, 2022: IR 1839 - A Local Law to Improve the County’s Affordable Housing Programs for Veterans and IR 1840 - A Local Law to Improve the County’s Affordable Housing Programs for Individuals with Disabilities

Nine members of SILO staff attended the public hearing held on December 6th 2022, at the William H Rogers Building in Hauppauge. All spoke of how important these bills are for Veterans and people with disabilities struggling to find affordable housing.

Nicole Bunay, the director of the Rapid Transition Housing and Olmstead Housing Programs, spoke of how cost of rents have, in some cases, increased 18% over the past year, the quickest increase since 1986. She also spoke of how many, though they qualify for a subsidy, are still not able to find an apartment to rent because the rents are too high.

Nicole also pointed out that there are approximately 3,800 documented Long Islanders who are homeless. In New York state there are approximately 1,300 homeless veterans.  28.7% of Veterans are disabled.

Taciana Cheriel, Assistant Director, stated how the Rapid Transition Housing Program has housed 93 participants since 2018, and, the Olmstead Housing program has helped to house 63 participants since 2017. Both programs together, just this past year alone, have received 186 new referrals. These programs are vital in helping disabled and medically frail individuals get out of shelters and nursing facilities, and into apartments they can manage, making them more self-reliant and in charge of their living situations. The hard part is when subsidies are not enough to meet the cost of the available housing, stressing the importance of this legislation.

Oscar Salgado, a veteran, and SILO’S Information Technology Director, spoke eloquently and poignantly regarding the plight of our veterans. He shared some of his own life experience: “There I was, a decorated Sergeant, having honorably served my country, back in the same predicament that I worked hard to overcome years back, being homeless.

I always said that Veterans are like an open flame, give us the tools and we can be the torch to light the path in the dark. But without what’s necessary, that flame will just extinguish.” He also told of how, “It’s a slippery slope. I have heard and witnessed so many Veterans become so desperate that they resort to using illegal narcotics in order to get accepted into inpatient treatment, just to have a place to sleep.. .  We say, ‘Thank you for your service,’ but provide very little to help in that aspect. Why is it that we are more worried about the all-mighty dollar, than giving our Veterans a fighting chance?  We are not looking for hand-me-downs, or freebies. All we are asking for is a fair chance to become part of society again, to rebuild our lives, to be able to live without fear of being homeless.”

 

**FREE PIANO**
Located at SILO, available for trial during business hours.
\*Needs to be tuned and transported\*

Contact: communications@siloinc.org  or call 631-880-7929 x118



 **Disability Vaccination Access Opportunity Center**
Written by Judy Wieber

“It is all about accessibility,” says Alberta Galdi, Public Education and Outreach Specialist at SILO.  We are a Disability Vaccine Access Opportunity Center.  If you are living on Long Island, have a disability which prevents you from getting to a vaccination site, and you are wanting to receive a vaccine / booster, SILO and the Suffolk County Department of Health, and in Nassau – the local Fire Departments can help.  Over the past two years, SILO has done extensive “outreach” and “in-reach,” informing participants of how the vaccine can be administered in the homes of people who are homebound, due to a disabling condition or illness.

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When calling our call center, or reading the bottom of our intake forms, participants are informed of the opportunity.  We have recently translated the flyer, telling of the opportunity, into Spanish, in an effort to reach out to our Hispanic population.  When we hold events, or hold support groups, we educate, support, and remind those who want to take advantage of the service to let us know here at SILO, and we will get them to the respective in-home providers.

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 “I cannot express how helpful and responsive the Suffolk County Department of Health (SCDOH) has been in getting the vaccine to our participants.  We are very fortunate here on Long Island, where we have established relationships with the SCDOH. In many parts of the country, these relationships have not been developed, and as a result, the needs of the people are not always met. You can hear the relief when people learn they have access, in turn; we feel good, knowing we are doing the right thing by people,” says Alberta.

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If you or someone you know might benefit, please call (631) 880-7929 and ask for the Disability Vaccine Access Opportunity Center.