**February Newsletter**

**2025**

**NYS Students with Disabilities Day
Written by Judy Wieber**

I recently learned that February 7th is Students with Disabilities Empowerment Day in New York State. Hearing this, it prompted me to think about my own days as a college student with a disability.

As I transitioned from high school to college, I remember those days being full of stress and anxiety. I was not even sure I wanted to go to college, never mind which college, or what I wanted to study. Would I dorm, or commute from home? It all seemed unimportant, and scary.

“Scary?” you might ask? Yes, because I not only was transitioning to adulthood, but I was also transitioning from a young person who had some useable vision, to one losing her sight.

At the age of eighteen I was considered ‘legally blind’. For me, this meant I had a visual field of less than 10% in each eye. My visual acuity was 20/40 with glasses in my better eye, and about 20/60 in the other. If something was straight in front of me, I could see it, but not the whole picture, just part of the picture. Things off to the side, above, and below, I could not see. Getting a driver’s license was out of the question. How would I get to school? I had to learn how to take the line bus. This was the 80s, so there was no SCAT.

Having some usable vision made it hard to believe I was even losing my sight; I did not think it would even happen. This delayed me from learning to use helpful tools like a cane, or braille. It was suggested that maybe I could get a guide dog. Who, me? No, not me, I was not blind! Dogs, canes, and braille, those were for a person who is blind. “I am not, blind,” I thought. I really didn’t notice the decrease in vision much, until I started bumping into things more, tripping on furniture. Streetlights at night appeared as though there were rainbow halos around them. The print on a page started to fade. I was losing contrast of black letters on a white page. Everything was blending into each other. It was getting harder to figure out what was what. Reading was getting harder to do. I started to rely on thick black marker pens, to write my notes.

Battling glaucoma throughout my life, hasn’t been easy. It meant traveling in and out of Manhattan to see top glaucoma specialists, countless eyedrop therapies, oral medications with potentially negative side effects, traditional glaucoma surgeries, laser therapy, and experimental procedures. School vacations were often reserved for eye surgery, so I wouldn’t miss too much.

My parents were great. My folks would travel, after a long day of work, back and forth to Manhattan for my doctor appointments. My ophthalmologist, Dr. Ted Lieberman, was associated with Mount Sinai. His office was on East 96th Street Manhattan. We would go at least once or twice a month, depending on how the eye pressure was doing.

I was not allowed to take regular gym classes, or take part in extracurricular sports. The concern was that I might get hit in the eye, causing my limited vision to be lost. Being kept out of such programs did not have a positive effect on my self-esteem. I often felt alone, and different from the other students.

Eventually, with some convincing from my family, I decided that I would go to Dowling College, though when I began, I was not too sure what I wanted to do. I pursued classes in education concentrating on special education. I was there from 1986 until I graduated in 1990. I did not drive, but rather commuted by the fixed route Suffolk County Transit system. I would walk from Montauk Highway down Idle Hour Boulevard, which was very windy and without sidewalks. Don’t get me wrong, I also received many rides from my family. However, because I wanted to be an adult and manage my own transportation, I would usually take the bus. From time to time, a classmate would spot me walking along the side of the busy road and offer me a ride from the bus stop to the campus.

During my college years I put the pressure on myself to do well. It was important to me to finish and graduate on time. It meant having to learn how to use a white cane in order to get around school. This was intermittent however, until one day I remember having my heart in my throat as a tried to navigate a very crowded stairwell without the cane. I believe at that moment, I knew if I was going to be safe, I needed to use it. I felt so self-conscious, as still having some vision, I could see the reaction of others. What would bother me the most was how they would stare, like they had never seen a person using a mobility cane before. I felt like a Martian from some other planet.

I hired students as readers and scribes to help me record some of my textbooks and copy notes off the chalkboard. A closed-circuit television (CCTV) and a laptop equipped with WordPerfect and the Vert Plus screen reading software were bought for me through the New York State Commission for the Blind for my last year at Dowling.

My eyesight was getting progressively worse. I would record my lectures with a cassette recorder, then go back to them to relisten to the lectures, and take notes using the CCTV. It all took a lot of time, more time than what my classmates needed to do their work. The purchased equipment enabled me to be more self-sufficient. It was also my first exposure to screen reading software. This was prior to me learning JAWS, what I use now to do my job at SILO. At that time there was no ‘World Wide Web’, so I had to use micro fiche to do my research.

Though most of my books were already recorded, some were not. I would have to either send the textbook to Recordings for the Blind, or I would try and find a fellow student to record the book on audio cassette. On occasion I would be a few reading assignments behind. It all was very time consuming and frustrating. I felt as though all I did was work, with no time to relax and enjoy ‘college life’.

Today, the advancements in screen reading software and the creation of the internet have aided students in accessing educational materials. Research has become easier for students with visual disabilities, but not every web site is accessible. Handouts are not created with students who are blind in mind. PDF documents are often scanned as an image instead of a true PDF, making them exceedingly difficult to read even with Optical Character Recognition software. Secondary education students still need to receive all their coursework at the same time as their peers, and in formats that are totally and completely accessible.

While at school, I was also asked to join a committee of students with disabilities. Our mission was to communicate our accessibility needs. We petitioned the administration for magnifying software to be bought for the student computer lab. The committee also advocated for an automatic door to allow independent access to the Learning Resource Center. Prior to the installation of the door, students using wheelchairs would have to wait, sometimes in the cold, for a passerby to open the door, causing some to be late to class. Keep in mind that this was prior to the passing of the ADA, which was passed in July of 1990, the summer after I graduated. We were told by the administration that we could have both magnifying software, and an automated door, if we fundraised for it ourselves. I am happy to say, that is exactly what the students did. Both accommodations were fundraised and bought by the hard work of students with disabilities.

The New York State Disability Services Council is inviting all secondary school students with disabilities, as well as their families, friends, faculty members, and anyone interested in the needs of college students with disabilities throughout New York State to attend a Zoom event on February 7, 2025, in order to secure more funding for adequate services. The event will be held online, to encourage a letter writing campaign for the passage of New York State Senate Bill 2023-S1880.

The National Center of Education Statistics estimated that 21% of undergraduate students reported having a disability in 2019 – 2020. This number has doubled in the last two decades. According to the Government Accountability Office, the largest expansion in the area of disability is in the areas of students with depression or with attention deficit disorders.

The percentage of college students with disabilities that successfully graduate from college is about 50%, which is about 20% less than their nondisabled peers. Higher education leads to more lucrative employment, but college is difficult, regardless of disability. Let’s make sure our students, tomorrow’s future, are receiving all the supports necessary to succeed. Let your legislators know how important this is to the community of people with disabilities. Encourage them to support New York State Bill 2023-S1880, asking for more funding for our students with disabilities.

**SCRC Holiday Luncheon Spotlights the Power of Vocational Rehabilitation
Written by Kelsey Kalafut**

On December 12, 2024, the Suffolk County Rehabilitation Council (SCRC) hosted its annual holiday luncheon at the Hauppauge Palace Diner. It was a joyful gathering filled with delicious food, festive games, and holiday cheer. However, what truly made the afternoon unforgettable was a heartfelt speech delivered by Michael Kohut, Peer Integration Specialist for SILO's Peer Integration Program (PIP).

Introduced by Doreen Nobile of ACCES-VR, who shared her personal experience with Michael's inspiring journey to employment at SILO, Michael captivated the room as he spoke about his life, the challenges he has overcome, and the critical importance of vocational rehabilitation services. Born and raised in Suffolk County, Michael lives with cerebral palsy, which provides him with a unique perspective on the populations served by those in attendance.

A graduate of Stony Brook University with a BA in Journalism and History, Michael's passion for advocacy extends beyond the disability community to all individuals facing systemic barriers. His speech was so powerful that there was barely a dry eye in the room. One diner employee even approached Michael afterward to express their admiration and share how deeply his words resonated with them.

As Michael's director, I could not be prouder of him; not just for his professional accomplishments but for the colleague and friend he has become. Watching him share his story with such eloquence and vulnerability was an incredibly moving experience. Michael's presence and message reminded everyone of the transformative role vocational rehabilitation plays in empowering individuals to lead fulfilling and independent lives. His story stands as a testament to resilience and determination, leaving a lasting impact on everyone in attendance.

The SCRC board, led by President Joani Madarash, Vice President/Treasurer Christina Murgola, Secretary Frank Krotschinsky, and Professional Development Committee Chairperson Doreen Nobile, organized a warm and welcoming event. Their commitment to fostering connections and celebrating the successes of the disability community was apparent throughout the afternoon.

As we look ahead to a new year, Michael's speech poignantly reminds us why we do what we do. It was an honor to witness such an inspiring moment during a day of celebration and camaraderie.



**SCRC Board with Michael Kohut**



**Doreen Nobile and Michael Kohut**



**Joani Madarash, Kelsey Kalafut and Michael Kohut**



**Mullah Bamyah
(South Sudanese Beef and Okra Stew)**

The following recipe was directly taken from: [“Rights and Recipes: Food that Fuels Global Women Activists”, by Susan Sygall and Ashley Holben. Published in 2022 by Mobility International USA,](https://miusa.org/resource/books-and-journals/rightsandrecipes/#:~:text=MIUSA%20joined%20forces%20with%2012,their%20communities%20and%20their%20countries.) this recipe book was written as a means of fund raising for the Women’s Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD).

​

“Cooking can create a platform for sharing ideas and promote understanding,” says Atim Caroline Ogwang Atanga, a deaf activist who prepared this mouth-watering recipe for traditional Mullah Bamyah alongside her WILD sisters in Eugene.

​

This power to bring people together is no small feat, especially in post- conflict regions like South Sudan, where women and girls with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by rape and sexual violence. In addition to speaking out on this issue before the United Nations, Caroline works tirelessly for inclusive education for girls with disabilities and advocates for greater representation of disabled.

​

**Ingredients:**

* 1 lb. okra, small (trim ends, cut to bite size pieces)
* 1 lb. ground beef
* 1 onion, medium, chopped
* 1 clove garlic, minced
* 1 tomato, large, chopped
* 1/ 2 cup beef stock
* 1 bay leaf
* cooking oil
* salt and pepper
​

**Steps:**

1. Chop okra, onion, garlic and tomato.

2. Heat a large pan or skillet and add 1 tablespoon of cooking oil on medium heat. Add the onion and cook until translucent.

3. Add the ground beef and stir until brown and fully cooked.

4. Add the okra, tomato, garlic, beef broth and let simmer on low heat until done, approximately 15 minutes.

5. Add salt and pepper to taste.

6. Serve with bread or rice on the side.

 **African Americans with Disabilities
Written by Judy Wieber**

February is Black History Month. This year I would like to highlight a few African Americans with disabilities that serve as excellent role models for us all despite the challenges in their lives.

* Harriet Tubman, the great abolitionist, lived with epilepsy.

* Thomas Wiggins, a wonderful pianist and composer, was the first person of color to play at the White House and was born blind.

* Barbara Jordan, despite having multiple sclerosis and being dependent on a wheelchair, was elected to the House of Representatives and was the first black woman to give a keynote address to a national convention.

* Solána Imana Rowe (better known as SZA), a Grammy winner, has publicly spoken of the challenges she faces as a person with ADHD writing music.

* Stevie Wonder has won 25 grammies despite being blind. He is world renowned for his music and humanitarian work. He is most proud of the Happy Birthday song written for Martin Luther King, which helped to bring about Martin Luther King Day. Stevie Wonder is also known for aiding in the production of the 1985 charity single “We Are the World” with USA for Africa. Stevie Wonder has served as a champion for many. He helped able-bodied and disabled alike by speaking up against Apartheid in South Africa. He has played an active role participating U.S. President’s Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities. He has raised money for the Children’s Diabetes Foundation and Junior Blind of America. He also started the Wonder Vision Awards Program, the mission of which is to help employ people with vision loss and encourage new products to help people with low vision live more independent lives.

**Super/Man – The Christopher Reeve Story
Written by Judy Wieber**

“Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look up in the sky! It’s a bird! It’s a plane. It’s Superman!

​

“Yes, it’s Superman, strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way!”

​

These are the words we would hear at the opening of each new episode of the 1952-58 “Adventures of Superman”, starring George Reeves and Phyllis Coates. And as the words were spoken, we would hear this magnificent orchestra music being played, composed by Leon Klatzkin, with lots of fanfare and triumph.

Superman was a fictional comic book character, created during the Great Depression as a symbol of hope. In the late 1930’s, Clark Kent was seen as a downtrodden working man, whereas Superman was depicted as a resilient champion defending the innocent and vulnerable.

And in 1978, “Superman: The Movie” was made for the big screen. Directed by Richard Donner and starring Christopher Reeve, “Superman: The Movie” was an instant blockbuster, grossing more than $300,000,000.00 at the box office.

​

I can remember going to the movies and watching Christopher Reeve playing the lead role. And he did it so well. He had that all American look. He was strong, and charismatic, and believable. And such a good actor.

​

If you have not seen the documentary: “Super/Man – The Christopher Reeve Story”, I recommend checking it out.

​

The documentary opens with how people loved and wanted a hero, and though “Superman” was a fictional character, the values he stood for, courage and good morals, are real values we admire and hope to find in others. We all want heroes.

​

The documentary chronicles Reeve’s life from graduating from Cornell university with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music Theory, pursuing his passion for acting at Juilliard, all his acting successes and self-reflection, and the horseback riding accident that left him a quadriplegic in 1995. But the film does not stop there, continuing to account his life and accomplishments after the accident, going back to work and starting the Christopher Reeve Foundation (later the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation), until the time of his passing in 2004 and the legacy he left behind.

​

It tells of his loyal friend he had in Robin Williams, the two women he loved, Gae Exton and Dana Morosini, and his beautiful children, Matthew, Alexandra, and Will. It goes in to how he was very active and athletic in his younger years. His son tells of how everything his dad did involve action and motion, playing tennis, hockey, baseball, and soccer. He loved swimming, horseback riding, gliding, sailing. Name a physical activity, Christopher Reeve had probably participated.

He was only 24 years old when he was selected for the part of Superman. He was very thin and lean, and chose to do some body building, bench pressing 350 lbs., for the role. A brilliant man, sensitive and human, he humbly talked about some of his shortcomings and how it took him breaking his neck to realize the important things in life involve relationships with others, caring and valuing other people. He so desperately wanted to help others with spinal cord injuries, and to bring awareness to the struggles of families confronted with the same injury.

It points out how, when an actor does such a convincing acting job, the audience comes to believe the actor must possess the same persona of the character they play. But Reeve often wanted others to know he did not have all the answers, he made mistakes.

​

What I liked most about this film is that you feel he had a big part in its production. Though the story is being told by his children and friends, clips are used of Christopher’s own voice from the audio book of his autobiography, “Still Me”. It makes it so believable, like he himself is telling the story.

I think in some respects, he loved being “Superman”, the fame and fortune it brought him, but in some respects, he felt he may have been unable to get other parts because of his role as the Man of Steel. It is my opinion that it was his fame, success, and recorded living athletic ability, that caused the government to listen to him.

​

Towards the end of the documentary, you get a sense of Christopher trying to make sense of things. A feeling of acceptance. How perhaps there was a reason, a purpose for the transformation he had to undergo, helping others in the long run. That everything that happened was not in vain.

​

The last quote in the movie is Christopher saying: “If you had asked me what defines a hero, a younger me would have said, ‘A hero is a man that does a courageous act, not worrying about the consequences it might bring oneself.’ Now I would say, ‘A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to endure and persevere despite overwhelming obstacles.’”



**On January 27th, 2025, Self-Initiated Living Options, Inc. met with Rosa and Hattie from the New York State Office for**[**New Americans (ONA)**](https://dos.ny.gov/office-new-americans)**to discuss how our programs and services could help support each other.

If interested in services offered by NYS ONA, please contact their hotline 1-800-566-7636 or visit:**[**https://dos.ny.gov/office-new-americans**](https://dos.ny.gov/office-new-americans?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR1VzU9lp5OFEDXDHQKMmW8NJr6nai86SXLPJ66xzyLwzqfbxrQfwL4PJ_4_aem_8VkUEIX7Mf7j-CG0slU8OA)