
A Model for Successful Outreach: Vision Loss Connections Is a Rich Tapestry of Programs

A Project Access
White Paper



**PROJECT
ACCESS**

A Project Access New York White Paper
by Patt Copeland

A Model for Successful Outreach: Vision Loss Connections Is a Rich Tapestry of Programs

A Project Access New York White Paper by Patt Copeland

Often museums and other arts organizations create programs and/or provide services for people who are blind or have low vision only to have few if any people take advantage of them. There are many reasons for this: it may be lack of public transportation to the museum or art center, the timing of the program (people who are visually impaired, for instance, may be reluctant to be out after dark, or they may have jobs and not be available on weekdays), a poorly designed program, or lack of knowledge about the program, that no one knows the program or services exist. Too often accessibility is conceptualized as a menu item on an organization's Website page with little thought given to effective outreach or true inclusion of an underserved minority population. To make the best use of dollars spent on accessible services, it is of paramount importance to reach a sizable audience so that the greatest number of people can benefit from these services. If the creation of a program for people with disabilities isn't coupled with outreach to the community, no matter how good the program is, it has little chance of success.

Too often, accessibility is conceptualized as a menu item on an organization's Website page with little thought given to effective outreach or true inclusion of an underserved minority population.

Some cultural venues have found active audiences for their programs through partnerships with local organizations of/for people who are visually impaired, such as a library for the blind; a local chapter of the National Federation of the Blind, the American Council for the Blind, or Lighthouse; or area employment or service centers. Others have formed strong connections with people who are visually impaired by inviting them to participate in focus groups and/or serve on an advisory board; these advisors not only can help the museum create excellent programs that meet their needs and preferences, but they can let museum staff know how best to promote the programs within the blindness community. Also, if advisory board members or focus group participants "take possession" of the program, i.e., embrace it as their own, they will have a vested interest in ensuring it is well attended.

In Seattle, Washington, accessible museum and arts programs are thriving because of the work of a unique organization, Vision Loss Connections; by providing the following case study of this organization, it is hoped that similar organizations will be formed in cities across America. Vision Loss Connections has greatly enriched the lives of Seattle-area people who are blind or visually impaired; there is little doubt that it also has influenced the expansion of cultural services and programs for this growing audience.

Vision Loss Connections' mission

Vision Loss Connections was designed to provide a rich tapestry of programs that are interwoven into the very fabric of the blind and low vision community. While a relatively new nonprofit organization – it was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization



Stacy Thurston, Leyah Sayler, and Ann Fagan enjoy touching this marbled origami crane sculpture. The trio are active in the organization's art programs.

in 2009 – it has established a reputation for attracting large audiences to the accessible museum tours and audio-described performances that it coordinates. The history and development of the organization can be used as a model of how to design accessible programs for maximum utilization and cost-effective planning. The model is based on a concept of community building and connection among people who are dealing with the life-changing challenges of coping with vision loss.

Vision Loss Connections started in 2004 as a support group that met twice a month and provided a facilitated group discussion for people to share what it was like to live with the emotional issues that resulted from serious eye conditions and vision loss. It quickly became apparent that social isolation and transportation difficulties were primary issues for the group. It also was evident that there needed to be a connection developed with people who had been blind or low vision since childhood, since they were already experienced in problem solving and living life as independent people with good mobility skills. Relationships were built with local chapters of two blindness consumer groups – the National Federation of the Blind and the American Council of the Blind – and private and state-funded services for the blind.

There are common issues that develop because of sensory disabilities. With blindness, the three major issues — issues that were raised regularly in the group's discussions — involve lack of access to:

1. Health and wellness activities, including recreation and sports
2. Arts and cultural events, including museum tours and theater performances
3. Classes and groups that featured necessary adaptations for optimum learning and skill development with impaired vision

With these needs clearly defined, Vision Loss Connections set out to offer a variety of programs to connect people through shared interests and involvement in popular activities. To do this, it utilized existing community resources and partnered with other organizations to offer a significant number of programs. It was able to do effective outreach to the local blind community because its founders were part of the community and understood the challenges of creating accessible services. Also, by advocating for quality audio and verbally described arts events and affordable pricing, Vision Loss Connections ensured popular support and large attendance.

Examples of successful programs

Here are some concrete examples of the work that Vision Loss Connections has done to create quality and popular accessibility in the three areas cited above: health/wellness activities, arts/cultural events, skill development classes.

Seattle had not had a Goalball team (soccer of the blind) in more than thirty years. Physical activity and keeping fit can be a major challenge when an individual is visually impaired. Vision Loss Connections brought together several leaders within the blind

community who were interested in forming a team. The organization then helped to secure gym space for practice and games.

For this program, Vision Loss Connections partnered with a talented and experienced Goalball athlete to coach the team and also recruited volunteers to help referee the games. Popular support built around the team and a positive energy developed with fitness and camaraderie as essential goals. Connections were established with Goalball teams in surrounding cities and intercity rivalries developed, with Seattle having an especially strong fan base. People directly involved with Goalball now number twenty-five in Seattle.

Vision Loss Connections also partnered with other groups to coordinate hiking, kayaking and snowshoeing excursions.

People from across a broad spectrum of professions and experiences meet at SAM's tours, where they share their interests in the arts and their perspectives on living successfully with impaired vision.

In the arts and cultural area, Vision Loss Connections looked first to the Seattle Art Museum (SAM); at that time, the museum had rarely had a visually impaired visitor. Vision Loss Connections first requested a tour of SAM's Olympic Sculpture Garden, and established a relationship with the museum's docents. These SAM volunteers are now part of an Access Committee who train and study to coordinate the Vision Loss Connections monthly tours. The Access Committee has worked with Art Beyond Sight, a New York City-based nonprofit organization that conducted a focus group at the museum and did extensive training with the Docents and Education Department to put in place a best practice model of accessible tours.

SAM's docents are extremely dedicated to finding creative ways to describe the art and use tactile facsimiles of precious and fragile art objects. Emphasis is placed on in-depth verbal description that places the work in historical context with personal and biographical information about the artist and the period in which it was created. Visitors with white canes and guide dogs are now common at SAM, where a welcoming spirit is extended to all visually impaired museum goers.

The Education Department at SAM gave the first green light to a successful program in offering free admission to the Access Tours. Vision Loss Connections handles the outreach and communication to the blind community through e-mails promoting the monthly tours, which are always filled to capacity with more than twenty to twenty-five people attending. Through Vision Loss Connections a visitor may opt to be met at a bus, light rail or Para-transit stop, so even a first time attendee feels comfortable and secure in locating the easiest route to and from the museum. The tours are very social and are followed by lunch in a private dining room adjacent to the museum's cafe. People from across a broad spectrum of professions and experiences meet at SAM's tours, where they share their interests in the arts and their perspectives on living successfully with impaired vision.

In addition to its popular program at SAM, Vision Loss Connections has coordinated Access Tours at the Museum of Flight, the Pacific Science Center, and the Bellevue Art Museum. The organization will arrange for participants at these museums to be met at public transportation stops, too.

Seattle is fortunate to have the 5th Avenue Theater, which plays a major role in creating and honoring the tradition of the Broadway Musical. Vision Loss Connections

partners with this cultural icon by bringing a large audience to the audio-described performances that the theater offers for each of its seven shows each season. The official audio describer is a Vision Loss Connections staff member, and the outreach and group ticket sales are handled through Vision Loss Connections. Aware of the importance of affordability, Vision Loss Connections sells tickets for \$25 per person. This is possible because the theater offers half-price tickets through its group sales office, and Vision Loss Connections subsidizes each ticket by an additional \$14.

Before the audio-described performances, Vision Loss Connections coordinates a luncheon at a popular restaurant located across the street from the theater. On average, 40 people purchase tickets for each show, although when “Oklahoma” was performed, 67 people took advantage of the reduced-price tickets for the audio-described performance.

Vision Loss Connections also organizes groups to attend performances with Seattle Opera and Seattle Chamber Music Society.

Louie Braille not only utilized the six dots of the Braille Cell for a complete written language, but also developed a Braille system of writing music.

People who appreciate art and music also want to be involved in creating art and making music. So Vision Loss Connections has organized a Tactile Art Group that meets in Studio Space at Seattle’s Artist and Craftsman Supply. The group has employed a rich palette of mediums in creating art that is both colorful and rich in textural qualities. Collage, jewelry making, beadwork, painting with textural additives, tile work, Ikebana, sculpting, and clay modeling are just some of the techniques and projects the class has undertaken. The creative atmosphere of the group has inspired guest artists to design tactile projects that appeal to all senses. The Tactile Art Group is also creating a large, three-panel tactile mural to decorate the outside facade of the new Art Space Building that provides housing and studio space for Seattle Artists.

The blind community has long been known for its rich tradition of creating fine musicians and vocalists. Louie Braille not only utilized the six dots of the Braille Cell for a complete written language, but also developed a Braille system of writing music. Sound People Association (SPA) is a musical group that Vision Loss Connections helped to form and nurture by connecting musicians with practice space, instruments, and sound equipment. The group developed a rich sound and crafted its own material to create a loyal group of fans who follow the group’s progress with avid interest.

Drawing on talent from within the blind community in the areas of music, art, and sports has developed a strong sense of pride and identity. Connecting with cultural events has now created its own sense of momentum where organizations now approach Vision Loss Connections wanting to create opportunities of access programs. Vision Loss Connections has reached a tipping point where people and organizations want to be involved with Vision Loss Connections. Human nature has a strong desire to connect, especially in an ever-growing anonymous society. Vision Loss Connections has created a rich tapestry, like a coat of many colors, that helps to draw attention and interest to people who are dealing with the life-changing challenges of vision loss.

All Vision Loss Connections staff members are volunteers, although the goal is to have a few paid staff in key positions. Currently, there are two full-time volunteers, eleven hands-on Board members, and eighty-five additional part-time volunteers.

These volunteers do everything from maintaining the organization's 15-seat van, to creating and managing the Website, coordinating and leading programs and special events, and coaching Goalball. Because of its many volunteers, Vision Loss Connections' budget is modest: under \$25,000 annually. Initially, the organization relied on individual donations, but recently it received a grant from the Seattle Department of Arts and Culture. With this recognition of its work, the volunteers who give so generously of their time and talents are hopeful that other grants will be forthcoming, enabling them to reach even more people and to help other cultural centers in the area provide meaningful programs for people who are blind or have low vision.

© 2013 Art Beyond Sight and Patt Copeland

Art Beyond Sight
589 Broadway, 3rd floor
New York, NY 10012
coordinator@artbeyondsight.org
www.projectaccessforall.org
www.artbeyondsight.org