

A Publication of St. Louis Society for the Blind & Visually Impaired

Society Welcomes New President/CEO, Sharon Mertzlufft



It is usually at the end of the year when you ring out the past and ring in the future. St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired was presented with the opportunity to do this in late

summer when President and CEO, Laura Park-Leach retired after five years of tremendous leadership. After a five-month search, SLSBVI found the right person for the job in Sharon Mertzlufft.

On August 26, 2024 St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired officially welcomed Sharon as the organization's new president and chief executive officer. Sharon brings more than 30 years of experience in the non-profit sector to SLSBVI, most recently having served as vice president and executive director of development and community affairs for St. Luke's Hospital in Chesterfield, Missouri, where her responsibilities included overseeing the health system's philanthropy and volunteer programs, spiritual care services, community outreach initiatives, marketing and communications.

Prior to joining St. Luke's, Sharon directed the \$250 million private fund-raising campaign that was led by the CityArchRiver 2015 Foundation as part of a \$380 million public-private partnership to transform and enhance the Gateway Arch National Park.

From 2003 to 2012, Sharon held leadership roles in philanthropy and institutional advancement with the Missouri Botanical Garden. Her career in resource development began with the United Way of Greater St. Louis, where she led workplace and major gifts fund raising outreach initiatives as part of the annual, community-wide campaign.

Betsy Kauffman, Board of Directors Chair, said, "Sharon is a highly respected leader in the Greater St. Louis area and has many years of experience in nonprofit organizations. With Sharon having family members affected by vision loss, she believes in the value and importance of organizations like the St. Louis Society

Wiking in the Rain

Gene Kelly would have loved this year's 3rd Annual Wike for Sight. He could have sung and danced in the rain to his heart's content; but for us, rain didn't exactly work for an event made for the outdoors. The entire week leading up to Friday, September 27, we kept checking the forecast, but when it became clear that the skies would not cooperate, staff made the decision to move it inside to the dry and comfortable offices of SLSBVI. Even though the rain persisted, the people still came.



The front desk in the lobby became the registration area where attendees checked in and picked up their Wike for Sight t-shirts. Volunteers from the Delta Gamma Sorority were once again on hand to aid in any capacity needed, whether it was welcoming and assisting guests to and from the multipurpose room or handing out food and soft drinks. Guests could take a "selfie" with the Wike for Sight photo board frame to commemorate the night and participate in the wine toss and raffle for a chance to win one of three mystery prize boxes.

Sharon Mertzlufft, Society's new President and CEO welcomed everyone and thanked our donors for their generosity. She also spoke about the strength of our Board of Directors and the example they set for non-profits throughout the community and the support they give to the Society.

It was a relaxed evening as everyone enjoyed the food and the wine tastings

presented by Mike Ward of Ward on Wine, a long-time friend of SLSBVI. The event ticket included a t-shirt, wine tasting, a charcuterie and delicious Nothing Bundt Cake bundtinis! If you've have never had a Nothing Bundt Cake or one of their bundtinis, then you don't know what you're missing!



For those of you who purchased a ticket and braved the rain, thank you! For those of you who purchased a ticket and stayed home, thank you for your support! No matter where you were, your support keeps us going and allows us to continue to provide services to the blind and visually impaired, just as we have for more than 113 years. For many more years to come, the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired will be here bringing hope and compassionate service to this community. Your support makes it happen!



for the Blind and Visually Impaired. We believe Sharon will lead the Society to achieve even greater levels of strategic influence, impact, and innovation on behalf of the constituents served."

Sharon earned her master's degree in business administration from Webster University in St. Louis, and her bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri – St. Louis.

Sharon said, "It is an honor to join the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired as President and C.E.O. The Society has touched thousands of lives in its more than 113-year history of service, and I look forward to working with our dedicated staff team, board of directors, advisory boards, and volunteers to continue building upon our legacy of exceptional care and service to our clients and community partners."

Serving Adults with Vision Loss



Message From the President

It is an honor to join the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired as the organization's new president and chief executive officer. Each day here is filled with exciting opportunities working with our dedicated staff team, board of directors, and volunteers to continue building upon the organization's tremendous strengths in providing exceptional care and service to our clients and community partners.

I congratulate Laura Park-Leach, my predecessor in this role, on her retirement. During her tenure with the Society, Laura conceptualized and implemented transformational initiatives that broadened our organization's reach throughout the St. Louis region and enhanced our services. The renovation of our Drews Low Vision Clinic featured in this edition of *Foresight News* is one of many ways in which Laura's expertise, creativity, and leadership made a difference in the lives of our clients.

In the current calendar year, the Society will inspire hope and provide care for more than 1,200 individuals with visual impairments, helping each client achieve their goals, share their talents and interests, engage in events and activities, and be confident in living independently or with the help of their caregivers. Your commitment, generous support and mission advocacy are deeply appreciated as incredible gifts that make this success possible for our clients and our organization.

With best wishes for a happy Thanksgiving and Holiday Season,

Sharon
Sharon Mertzluff

Occupational Therapy Interns Learn the Ropes of Low Vision

Every summer and fall, Society welcomes a student from Maryville University who is about to complete their master's degree in occupational therapy. An internship is required as part of their degree program, and those who have participated have found that working with low vision or blind clients can be challenging, yet very rewarding and truly opens their eyes to a different approach to OT.

Thanks to our Director of Adult Services and Low Vision Clinic Coordinator, Dr. Jennifer Lauer, this marks the Society's third year of participation in the OT Internship through Maryville University. Over the recent summer months, Callie Vaughn spent 13 weeks with us, and now in the midst of fall, Amelia Signorelli has joined us in the OT internship role.

Callie always loved athletics and the way the body works. She decided to follow a career in strength and conditioning, and occupational therapy felt like a natural process to follow. She said, "I have loved my time here at the Society. I have learned so much and just love the staff and the clients. They have really touched my heart, and I've learned so much about low vision that I never knew."

Callie said, "I am a certified strength and conditioning specialist through the NSCA (National Strength and Conditioning Association). I completed an internship through DASA (Disabled Athlete Sports Association), working with disabled persons in their abilities gym. I've seen the benefits and improvements the client can continue to make once they are finished with OT. I would love to have a private practice in the future with a gym where I can do outpatient Occupational Therapy and then once the OT part is good, we can strength train and continue with lifelong improvements."



When asked where she sees herself in five years, Callie laughed and said, "Probably not there yet! I'm very interested in being a hand therapist, but also interested in sports and sports medicine. I'd like to work with athletes and hand therapy."

Amelia's interest in Occupational Therapy came out-of-the-blue, so to speak. In high school, her class was asked to "job shadow" people to get an idea of what profession they might like to pursue in college. Amelia knew she wanted to be in the field of helping others, so she shadowed a veterinarian, a nurse and an aunt who just happened to be an OTA. The aunt said to her niece, "Why don't you consider Occupational Therapy?" Amelia had never heard of it, so she shadowed at Leaps and Bounds, a pediatric rehab facility in St. Peters and she said, "I just fell in love." And now here she stands just about to graduate with a master's degree in occupational therapy.



The same question of where you see yourself in five years was posed to her and she said, "Hopefully at a job somewhere outpatient. I really like that setting, because I feel like I can see people making the most gains because they're outpatient versus inpatient. When the client is inpatient, you have to send them off before they're completely good to go. But with outpatient, you can keep working with them until you know they're truly ready and as independent as they want to be." Amelia has just started her internship and is knee deep into getting a thorough education in low vision with services at SLSBVI.

Both Amelia and Callie will graduate from Maryville University with a master's degree in OT in January 2025.

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SLSBVI Celebrates Grand Reopening of the Drews Low Vision Clinic

In the Spring issue of our newsletter, you read about the remodeling of the Drews Low Vision Clinic and how it was taking shape. It was still in the finishing stages when the newsletter went to press. In mid-June work was completed. Many of you joined us for the Grand Reopening and Open House that was held on June 20 and 21. What a delight it was to see the look on the faces of donors, Board members and clients as they walked through the bright new space.



A generous appropriation from the State of Missouri was instrumental in the funding for the Society to complete these much-needed renovations to the clinic so we could better serve our clients.



What do you do when you have three small storage rooms that do not really work well for client services? You turn them into one large CCTV Training Center for clients to come in and learn how to use the devices in a quiet, enclosed space with plenty of room to see all the inventory.



What do you do when you have a room that is really too small to be an office? You turn it into a dedicated Lighting Room so clients can check out the types of lamps and lighting that best serves their needs at home.

What do you do when you have a large space in the back of the clinic that is more decorative, but not used a whole lot? You turn it into a second Low Vision Exam Lane so that you can have two eye doctors in the office on the same day to serve more clients.



Also during the renovation project, our Sight Solutions Shop was expanded an additional five feet, another door was added, and a classy window cling replaced the stencil letters. The shop is bright, open and full of items to aid the blind and visually impaired.



Dr. Jennifer Lauer, Director of Adult Services, along with the leadership of former President and CEO Laura Park-Leach, were instrumental in laying out the needs and design of the clinic. Dr. Lauer said, "We were able to more than double the size of the shop, which allowed us to expand our merchandise offerings. We also have a dedicated lighting room now, so people can come in and look at lighting in an area that is private and out of the main clinic area where it used to be. The second optometry lane allows us to have two low vision doctors here at the same time. We are serving more clients and have decreased the waiting time."

Drs. Nanci and James Bobrow donated artwork to the Society that is showcased throughout the vision training rooms and in the Sight Solutions Shop. If you have not had the opportunity to check out the remodeling, come on down and see it for yourself!



STL Zoo and Sight Collective Host "SEE LIKE ME" Day at the Zoo

On September 12, the Saint Louis Zoo and The Sight Collective hosted the first ever "SEE LIKE ME" A Day at the Zoo for the Blind and Visually Impaired. "See Like Me" was a day to educate all Zoo guests on the unique ways species "see" and how vision and senses differ among animals.



Clients, staff and volunteers from various organizations who serve the blind and visually impaired in the St. Louis metro area enjoyed the day that incorporated

tactile and sensory experiences across the animal habitats and in the lower level of the Living World Center. Participants were able to get up close and personal with giraffes, puffins and penguins, and stingrays.

We followed a few of our SLSBVI clients around as they fed hungry giraffes and interacted with the stingrays in Stingray Cove. Their faces said it all as

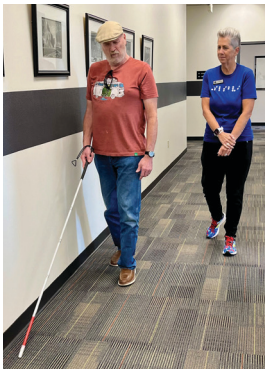


they were thrilled at the opportunity to feel the texture of the giraffe's tongue as it took the lettuce and the slippery feel of a stingray's back and its mouth on their palm as it took fish from them. Our staff were also in awe of the opportunity to interact with the animals. It's not every day you get to look a giraffe in the eyes. We look forward to doing this again next year!

The Sight Collective is a group of organizations servicing the blind, visually impaired and deaf community that provide specialized services to our clients. The Society is proud to be a part of this effort. You can learn more about the Sight Collective by scanning this QR code.



A New Path Forward



We talk often about Orientation and Mobility as one of our many services here at Society, but what does it mean? Orientation and mobility (O&M) training is a program that helps people with visual impairments learn how to navigate their environment independently and safely. How fortunate we are that the Society now has a full-time Orientation and Mobility Specialist,

Debbie Zufan. Debbie helps people learn new skills to compensate for reduced visual information and improve their quality of life.

If you close your eyes and attempt to move, you immediately lose your orientation. So, with Debbie's skills, clients learn how to orient themselves and to know where they are in a space and where they want to go. She teaches them how to carry out a plan to get to their destination and to learn mobility skills to travel efficiently and as safely as possible. The training is tailored to each person based on their vision loss, lifestyle, activities, and goals. Many of Society's clients have already met with Debbie to begin cane training or to improve their skills using a cane.

One of those clients drove all the way from Belle, Missouri, to take advantage of several Society services all in one day, including Occupational Therapy, Assistive Technology, and Orientation and Mobility training. His name is Marvin Leverett, and it was a productive day for him. Marvin's life changed when he was diagnosed with Meige (pronounced meej) Syndrome. He learned about St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired through the library in his hometown of Belle, Missouri. A librarian handed them a brochure with our information; his wife made the call, and that is how they ended up driving all the way from there to here.

Marvin said, "The muscles around my eyes will not allow my eyelids to stay open for any duration of time and I'm considered functionally blind. I haven't been able to drive since 2016 and have been kind of walking around in the dark since then."

Meige Syndrome is a neurological movement disorder characterized by continuous or intermittent muscle contractions which cause abnormal, often painful, repetitive movements in the eyes, mouth, tongue, and jaw. Meige Syndrome is a combination of two forms of dystonia – eye dystonia (blepharospasm) and mouth, tongue, or jaw dystonia (oromandibular). Mr. Leverett has eye dystonia.

He met with one of our OT's, Mariko (pronounced Mad-ee-ko), whom we affectionately call M. She did an overall assessment with him, and they made a plan that would best suit his needs. Callie, our summer OT intern set Mr. Leverett up with audio books for the visually impaired and software from the library to help with his computer. He also met with John Boyd for Assistive Technology help that included audio assistance on his phone, tablet and computer and this has made his life a lot easier.

And then came Debbie. "She was really instrumental. She got me to where I was using a cane properly! She also taught me and my wife how to work as a human guide and how I can follow her body movement. There will be no more running into shelves at Walmart!"

Without being handed that brochure with our phone number, Marvin Leverett would not have made it to SLSBVI. He is very thankful for us and said, "Don't wait until the last minute to reach out and get help! Call that number like we did. I believe that they are placed here for that purpose and I'm very thankful."

To see Marvin's entire interview, scan the QR code:



Society Gets Set to Launch New Counseling Program

Social Workers have heart. They care or they would not do what they do. When someone calls and asks about the Society's services, our social workers, Marie Walker and Emma Grady-Pawl, are here to help. Marie has worked in the field for over 30 years. Emma is newer to the field and working to complete her certification as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). Together they make an incredible team, and they share a sincere compassion for people.

Society has always had support groups led by the social workers, and Emma is getting ready to launch a new Counseling Program. As Emma wrote in her proposal for the program: The experience of vision loss is often accompanied by complex emotions such as depression, anxiety, anger, grief, and isolation, and people may struggle with the impact of their vision loss on personal relationships, work, socialization, and recreation. Therapy allows clients a safe space to identify and process troubling thoughts, feelings, and concerns, with the ultimate goal to improve their quality of life... Implementing a counseling program with an emphasis on solution-focused brief therapy and motivational interviewing will fill a need for clients and support their utilization of the Society's other services.

One of the program objectives is to improve clients' mental health and wellbeing and specifically reduce anxiety and depression when present. The program will include eight to ten 50-minute weekly sessions with an option for two additional sessions as needed and requested by the client. Emma will start with five clients and expand based on need and outcomes.

Emma said: "Starting a counseling program for our clients is deeply important to me because I am passionate about supporting people's mental health and well-being and empowering them to feel like the best versions of themselves. I believe that everyone deserves a space where they can feel seen, heard, and understood—especially in ways that recognize their unique experiences. I hope to offer a platform for healing and growth, where individuals can find strength and motivation in themselves to achieve their goals."

The SLSBVI Counseling Program is expected to begin by next spring.

Society Hires New Orientation and Mobility Specialist



It has been a few years in the making, but at long last, SLSBVI has a full-time Orientation and Mobility Specialist. Meet Deborah Zufan, or Debbie as we call her. Having recently moved to St. Louis from Phoenix, Arizona, Debbie is thrilled to join the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired as a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist.

Debbie holds a master's degree in the field of blindness and visual impairment, and is also Executive Director of Fisher Educational Consulting, meeting the needs of persons with visual impairments, providing in person and virtual services. She has devoted almost 20 years to the O&M profession.

Debbie said, "I was a technician in an ophthalmology practice and had questions about the patients who had lost their vision. This prompted me to pursue University Master's programs in Visual Disabilities. I learned that many of these programs were grant funded—and still are—to provide specialists in our field."

Debbie has had the privilege of serving as COMS Supervisor for the Lighthouse for the Blind in St. Louis' SOAR Summer Program since 2019. She is a member of the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER). She has also served on the Board of the Valley of the Sun YMCA and the Braille Institute of America Cane Quest Committee.

Debbie and her wife, Christie, are happy to return to the Midwest. Debbie is originally from Illinois and Christie from Ohio. They adore their two-year-old mini cock-a-poo, Webster, who runs the household! They love to travel, especially to beaches and on cruises. Debbie has two adult daughters; Tara lives in Florida and Peyton in Ohio.

What drives her to keep doing Orientation and Mobility? "It's the best profession in the world! The difference that this specialized instruction makes in people's lives is so very rewarding. O&M provides instruction and strategies to clients in order for them to make the best travel decisions."

Transportation Grant Provides Additional Trips for Clients Utilizing Cabs, Ubers and Lyfts

Transportation has become a talking point in St. Louis after route cancellations by some providers and the ongoing lack of affordable transportation options for persons with disabilities. The need is great.

The Society works to fill in some of this gap for clients through our organization's transportation services that are supported by public funding sources and philanthropic contributions. Our transportation specialists, Rose Lawhorn and Debbie Chase, can attest to how many requests we receive, because their voice mail boxes fill up before they have a chance to return all calls.

The third-party transportation assistance made possible through a grant from the Deaconess Foundation has been very well received by Society's clients, so much so that the grant has been fully expended.

This support has meant so much to Society's clients. To hear relief in the voice of the person on the other end of the phone when they found out we could get them to an important medical appointment was moving to say the least. We helped a client who battled addiction get to her weekly meetings, so she could stay clean and sober. She was facing many obstacles with low vision on top of it, and this grant helped her stay on course. We helped a client who had just gotten out of prison and needed transportation to several appointments to get his life back on track. He also has Diabetic Retinopathy. Where Rose or Debbie were booked with other transportation requests, the cabs filled in. The client is now working at a nonprofit organization in the community and recently called to say how happy he was. An older client with macular degeneration suffered from arthritis in her back and needed weekly pain injections. Guess who got her to those appointments? She eventually had surgery to alleviate the pain and doesn't need those weekly trips anymore. Everyone has a story and there are many more we could share in this article. As stated before, the need is great.

As of September 30, the Deaconess Grant made possible 293 trips via cab, and 413 Uber/Lyft trips for a total of 706. This is in addition to the 1,977 trips Rose and Debbie have provided. Thank you to the Deaconess Foundation and other organizations and individuals whose support fuels our transportation services.

Your generosity supports provision of services to more than 1,200 people in 2024!

Making a charitable gift to St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired provides immediate, local impact for members of our region who experience vision loss. A gift helps the agency to fulfill our mission with each client—to enhance independence, empower individuals and to enrich the lives of people who are visually impaired or blind. As 2024 comes to a close, please consider making your annual gift to St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired to help support our provision of low vision medical care, occupational therapy, assistive technology, orientation and mobility, social work, support groups, and transportation services.

To make a gift of stock, please contact our advisors directly, Betsy Dow or Greg Dow at: Mariner Wealth Advisors - St. Louis LLC; 314-227-2500, to arrange the transfer of securities to St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Make a recurring gift or one-time donation online at slsbvi.org or scan this code:



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Please contact Megan Connelly, Director of Development, if you have questions about your gift to SLSBVI or wish to discuss legacy giving: development@slsbvi.org or (314) 968-9000.

THANK YOU!

The Society gratefully acknowledges financial contributions received from April 1, 2024 to September 30, 2024

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