

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

How Society Impacts the Lives of our Clients

St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired has been helping the blind and visually impaired for more than 114 years. That is an amazing thought in and of itself.

In 1895, on the very spot where the Society building sits (8770 Manchester Road), was a general merchandise store that sold groceries and tinware. Long before Uber Eats, deliveries were often made by the buckboard seen in front of the photo below on an unpaved, dusty road named Manchester.



8770 Manchester Road, then and now

According to the Brentwood Historical Society, the building was built by Thomas Madden, an Irish immigrant who settled the area in the 1870s. He soon became the main businessperson in the area, also building a tavern called the Ten Mile House, a barber shop, and a blacksmith shop. The Madden quarry was located in the area of present-day Ace Hardware which sits east of the Society. He became so prominent that the area was named after him: "Maddenville." Maddenville became the "Village of Brentwood" in 1919.

A lot happens in 114 years. Just as Maddenville and the City of Brentwood have evolved, so has the Society. SLSBVI started as the Missouri Association for the Blind in 1911, teaching Braille to blind citizens of St. Louis. In 1930, we changed our name to St. Louis Society for the Blind and then added "visually impaired" in 1986 to recognize that the majority of individuals served were not totally blind. With evolution comes growth, and in 1980 the Society moved from The Continental Building to 7959 Big Bend Road in Webster Groves. As staff and doctors were added, the Society outgrew that location and in 1997 purchased the building at 8770 Manchester Road.



Old Society Building
7959 Big Bend Road,
Webster Groves



Current Location

Today, the Society building sits on the same spot as Maddenville's General Merchandise store and every week, the lives of the blind and visually impaired are being empowered and enriched.

Two of those lives that have richly benefited from SLSBVI services shared their stories with us. Meet Douglas Carter and Polly Willard. They both write poetry and they both participate in events and services at the Society on a regular basis.

Polly Willard has been a client since 2010. She was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa at the age of forty-one.

"I've always had night blindness, and I figured everybody did. I had studied painting in graduate school and was extremely excited to start working at the Saint Louis Art Museum and I always got there before it opened. One day I was driving into the parking lot on a bright sunny day. When I went into the art museum my eyes just started to flicker in the most amazing, shocking way. It was almost like a strobe light. It really frightened me."



It was 2010 when she came to the Society out of pure depression and anxiety after an eye doctor made her cry.

"I went to three different doctors about my eyes, and they all made me cry, because they were blunt and said you're going blind and there's nothing you can do about it. Then an ophthalmologist referred me to the Society, so I came in for a low vision exam, and Society's doctors never once made me cry." She laughed. "They totally understood the situation and took a lot of time with me, and I have been coming regularly since 2010."

Society has helped Polly with magnifying devices and a CCTV. She started attending the social events, including I Can Tech. *"I really like those because I need to have blind friends, so I don't feel like I'm the only person out here among sighted people. I did my white cane training at Society and I'm confident with my cane. I don't go anywhere without it."*

When her vision was declining, Polly left the art museum and taught art history at St. Louis Community College for 27 years. Unable to paint anymore, she found a new type of art through writing poetry to help release her emotions. She teaches a poetry class through Washington University's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, and she also taught a six-week class at Society for fellow clients in 2023. That's where Douglas Carter found his poetry spark again.

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How Society Impacts the Lives of our Clients

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When asked how SLSBVI has impacted her life, Polly said, *"It means a lot to me, because it's a place where I know I can get help if I need it. I know I can count on them. It's especially important that people donate and support the Society, too. This place is so valuable to people who can get kind of lost and feel like they don't have anybody. It's one of the key organizations for people who are visually impaired and need to know about all your services and the encouragement that you offer. It's really hard being out here in the sighted world going blind and feeling like you're on your own. I know where I can go to get that lift and that encouragement to keep on going."*

Douglas Carter has been a client since December of 2021. Diagnosed with Diabetic Retinopathy, he is blind in the left eye, with low vision in the right. We asked Douglas to talk about his relationship with the Society.



"As my vision worsened, my mom started searching online for help. She found St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired and called. I've used many of your services including low vision exams to see where my vision is at and I participated in the Support Group and really like attending the activities and peer groups here."

When asked what the Society means to him and how we have impacted his life, he replied, *"I live just down the street, and you are so close and convenient. Everyone is helpful, supportive and I know I'm not the only one going through this. I fell into a rut and a 'woe is me' type of thing. I know people are here to help me get through it."*

Douglas started writing poetry in high school, and after graduation life got in the way as happens to many of us, and he simply stopped pursuing it.

"In 2023, I heard through Society's activity line that there was going to be a poetry class offered by a fellow client, Polly Willard. I decided to take it, and it's got me writing again."

We asked Douglas to draft a poem about us, and here's what he produced:

This Place
...is not hard to find with assets to help you survive.
This Place
...supports when you're trying to get back in stride.
This Place
...has people with common goals.
This Place
...and a relationship with God and church helps uplift my soul.

Former Society President and C.E.O., David Ekin, Pays a Visit to SLSBVI

In September, David Ekin, former president and C.E.O., dropped by the Society for a visit. He was in town catching up on business and family and decided to reach out to Sharon Mertzluff. She and David had the opportunity to talk about the vision, changes, and growth of SLSBVI, which included touring the renovated Drews Low Vision Clinic, the Sight Solutions Shop, the CCTV Training Center, and Assistive Technology Center.



David's tenure with SLSBVI began in 1994 where he oversaw an annual operating budget that grew from \$350,000 to about \$1.8 million. He helped grow the Drews Low Vision Clinic, orchestrated the move from Webster Groves to the Brentwood location and celebrated the 100th Anniversary of the Society in 2011. He retired in 2019 after 25 successful years.

Say Hi to Our New Staff!

In 2025, we added three new employees. Society is pleased to introduce our newest colleagues.



Maggie Womick,
Administrative and
Data Management
Assistant



Julie Stanglein,
Intake Specialist



Sheila Elmore,
Bookkeeper

From the Czech Republic to St. Louis: Kamila Kebrdle - Occupational Therapist (OT) Intern

Kamila Kebrdle, who goes by the nickname, Kami, came to the United States from the Czech Republic when she was 10 years old. Her adjustment to such a different culture has played a significant role into who she is and why she is pursuing a doctorate in Occupational Therapy (OTD).



Kami's main reason for becoming an OT is because of her grandfather. Kami explained, *"Well, my grandpa is a doctor. I wanted to do something in medicine but didn't want to be in school forever."* Laughing, she added, *"So, here I am!"*

Society has had an impact on her as she continues her studies. *"It's been interesting to learn that specific niche area and the Society has helped me expand my horizons. I'm looking at the people I work with and what the clients struggle with and finding out what's out there to help people."*

Kami will graduate from Washington University in August 2026 as an Occupational Therapist, OTD. She hopes to work in the neonatal intensive care unit setting. She also has interest in oncology or working in the school districts.

Kami's passion for working one on one with people goes back to that statement earlier about adjusting to a different country and culture. *"I moved here at the age of ten. There were multiple people who helped me as far as school, language, and socially. I see OT as a way to help out a kid or an adult in a similar situation that I was in. I want to give what I was given."*

Society Hosts Glide Demo Day

On October 22, St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired hosted a Glide Demo Day with Glidance Founder and C.E.O., Amos Miller. Glide is an Artificial Intelligent (AI)-powered primary mobility aid for people who are blind or have low vision.

Registration for both demonstration sessions was full. Many Society clients took advantage of exploring the debut of this revolutionary technology. Mr. Miller was on hand to answer all questions about the Glide.



The Glide device can

- Intelligently navigate around obstacles and hazards.
- Locate doors, elevators, stairs, and more.
- Guide you to your destination safely, indoors, and outdoors.
- Freestyle Navigation – The freedom to stroll wherever you choose with the knowledge that Glide will keep you safe and walking straight.

Additional features to be explored and added post-launch as they continue to develop the smart cane's capabilities include directed navigation, pre-mapped and saved routes, and description of your surroundings with an active scene description.

Each client who took a turn with the smart cane was amazed at how the AI technology worked, as they took a stroll with the Glide and a trainer through the hallways of Society. Mary Hale, peer group leader and client since 2008, said she had already purchased one and was looking forward to utilizing the device. Spouses Terry Nord and Kay Malmquist are also sold on the device and have already made their purchase as well. Terry said, *"It still has some details to be worked out, but I'm very impressed with it."* Other clients who evaluated the Glide, including Anna Schell and Sharon Anders were a little uncertain about it. Anders said, *"I'm not sure if it's going to be for me, but what an amazing device!"*

The Society and our clients look forward to the continuing development of this technology.



See Like Me Day at the Zoo for the Blind and Visually Impaired

In 1968, Simon and Garfunkel released a song called "At the Zoo." The lyrics started like this:

*Someone told me it's all happening at the zoo.
I do believe it
I do believe it's true*

Something very special was happening at the Zoo on Friday, September 5, when the Saint Louis Zoo and the Sight Collective hosted their second annual "See Like Me" A Day at the Zoo for people who are blind, visually impaired and deaf/blind. While the Zoo may be familiar, the Sight Collective may need an introduction. The greater St. Louis Region's organizations that provide services for people who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf/blind, assemble to share best practices and collaborative opportunities in overall service delivery and work in our area. This cooperation is recognized as The Sight Collective.

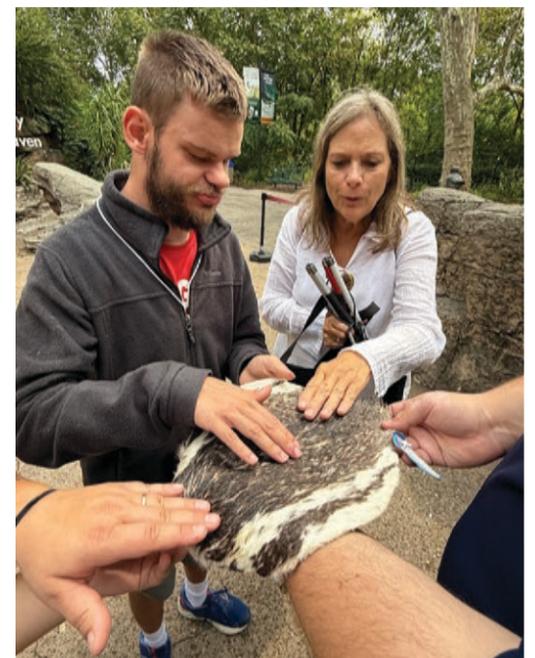


The Zoo and Sight Collective promoted the day as an opportunity to hear the munch of a giraffe's snack, feel the cool splash of a stingray, and listen to the chatter of penguins and puffins.

"See Like Me" celebrated the many unique ways animal species experience sight—and how animals rely on other senses, too. Many of the Society's clients and guests of other organizations explored tactile and sensory activities, enjoyed behind-the-scenes animal experiences, and connected with local resources that support the blind, visually impaired, and deaf communities.

The behind-the-scenes experiences were indeed special, and featured giraffe feeding at Red Rocks, a private tour of the Penguin and Puffin Coast, and Stingrays at Caribbean Cove.

Several Society clients were pleased to participate and raved about the unique day and the beautiful weather. Plans are already underway for the 2026 See Like Me event.



Enriching Lives: Client Activities and Fun

Society clients have enjoyed an active summer and fall this year. Thanks to a grant from the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis and individual donors, here's a rundown of what the clients have been up to in the second half of 2025. A special thank you to Society's Grant Writer, Justin Novak, for arranging all these activities.

YUCANDU MOSAIC PARTY

In June, Society provided an opportunity for our clients to attend a mosaic party hosted by YUCANDU Studio in Kirkwood. Five clients enjoyed a unique experience of making their own mosaic, by gluing an array of colorful tiles into an exclusive design.

This event made possible by the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis.



MUNY TICKETS JUNE-AUGUST

The St. Louis Muny once again provided free Community Access tickets for our clients to enjoy a night out under the stars at the Muny. Each client was allowed two tickets to attend one show. The shows included Come From Away, Disney's Frozen, Evita, Dear Evan Hansen, La Cage aux Folles and Jersey Boys.



ST. LOUIS CARDINALS DISABILITY NIGHT AT THE BALLPARK

July 10 was Disability Pride Night at the Ballpark, and SLSBVI provided two free tickets for approximately twenty-five clients! This experience was made possible by a generous individual donor.

KANSAS AND 38 SPECIAL, WITH SPECIAL GUEST, JEFFERSON STARSHIP- LIVE! AT THE FABULOUS FOX THEATRE

On Saturday, September 27, ten clients plus a guest had the opportunity to relive their classic rock years, by seeing two of America's preeminent classic rock bands, KANSAS and 38 Special who teamed up with special guest, Jefferson Starship. This event made possible by the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis.

CONNECTING WITH ART: THE TACTILE GALLERY AT SLU - SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

On October 1, clients were treated to a docent-led tour at the SLU Tactile Art Gallery at the Saint Louis University Museum of Art. The tactile gallery was created for visitors to experience art through touch. The gallery has two rooms with artworks on display from the SLU art collection and 3D reproductions of important artworks from museums around the world. This event made possible by the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis.



CHUCK BERRY BIRTHDAY BASH! POWELL HALL

Thanks to a generous grant from the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis, twenty-five clients and a guest got to enjoy an afternoon of Chuck Berry classics on October 18 at the newly renovated Powell Symphony Hall. They celebrated the legendary Chuck Berry's birthday with this unforgettable performance of the star's hits by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

RAIN-A BEATLES CHRISTMAS TRIBUTE-FOX THEATRE

Thanks to a generous grant from the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis, fifteen clients and their guest enjoyed a nostalgic evening of love, joy, and timeless music. On December 11, clients heard holiday favorites alongside the legendary sounds of the Beatles. The festive celebration blended the magic of the holidays with the unforgettable music you know and love.

Ways to Give

As we decorate the agency, send messages of cheer, and plan holiday gatherings, we find ourselves reflecting on the holiday season and our collective traditions.

The annual client holiday party is one of our community's favorite traditions. We gathered with about sixty clients, families, and friends in early December. A delicious meal, holiday craft, and festive carols sparked the holiday spirit.

Often, the holiday season and end of the calendar year bring opportunities to give. The Society is immensely grateful to each of our donors—both who give throughout the year and those who make a contribution to St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired a part of their holiday traditions!

A year-end gift can both spread holiday spirit and cheer and help donors to realize tax advantages. There are a variety of ways to make a gift to the Society. You may send a check to the agency by mail by using the envelope included with this newsletter, or by making a gift online by clicking the "Donate" button at www.slsbvi.org. Additional opportunities to make a charitable contribution to the Society include the donation of securities, qualified charitable distributions from a retirement account, and more. Details can be found at slsbvi.org/ways-to-give-2. If you have questions, please contact the Office of Development at (314) 301-7305 or development@slsbvi.org.

The generosity of our community supports our services to more than 1,300 clients each year, clients who realize courage, resilience, and hope on their paths to independence as they experience vision loss or blindness. The Society is grateful for the ongoing support that our community provides and wish you a safe and happy holiday season!

Legacy Gifts to the Society Provide Vital Support for the Future

Including a gift to the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired in your will or estate plan provides a lasting benefit to the agency and is an enduring opportunity to illuminate the path ahead for individuals with vision loss. Planned giving now supports the agency for years to come.

Legacy gifts can include bequests or designation of the Society as a beneficiary of your charitable trust, Individual Retirement Account (IRA), 401K, life insurance policy, donor advised fund (DAF) or bank account.

Donors who elect to leave a legacy gift to the Society can be recognized as members of the Rey and Marli Eilers Guild. The Rey and Marli Eilers Guild was named in honor of foundational legacy donors who served and supported the Society for more than fifty years and recognizes individuals who have included the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired in their will or estate plan.

To share your intention to make a charitable gift from your estate to the Society or for information regarding the Society's charitable giving opportunities, please call the Office of Development at (314) 301-7305 or email development@slsbvi.org.



Client Holiday Party 2025

Client Activities Calendar: Games Accessible for Blindness (GAB)

Mary Hale has been a client of the Society since 2008 and has led the Games Accessible for Blindness (GAB) for many years. There's usually a full house on the fourth Tuesday of each month in Society's multipurpose room where GAB meets to play games, such as Bingo, Pass the Trash, Name that Tune and other card or dice games.

The game day has become so popular that Mary decided to add a second game day to each month to satisfy the wants of all her fellow clients. So, GAB now meets on the second and fourth Tuesdays of each month. The second Tuesday game day is called GAB2. It consists of a simple card or dice game. The cards have Braille and large print for those with low vision. The dice are tactile in two varied sizes. The group decides which game will be played after arriving.

The fourth Tuesday game day is called GAB4 and continues to be a day for Bingo or other fun verbal games. Mary will always announce at the beginning of each month what the game for GAB4 will be.

Here's a look at all the Peer Groups and other organizations that meet monthly at SLSBVI.

UNITED WORKERS FOR THE BLIND

Second Friday of the month, 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND (Lewis and Clark Chapter)

Second Saturday of each month, 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

GAMES ACCESSIBLE FOR BLINDNESS (GAB2 and GAB4)

Second and fourth Tuesday of the month, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

I CAN TECH

Third Wednesday of the month, 10:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
\$5.00 if staying for lunch.

ENRICHING OUR LIVES TOGETHER

Third Thursday of the month, 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

SIGHT AND SOUND IMPAIRED (SASI)

Third Saturday of the month, 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.



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St. Louis Society for the Blind
and Visually Impaired

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SAVE THE DATE!

Visionary Gala

APRIL 18, 2026

Coming in April 2026:
The annual Visionary Gala.

Sponsorships and Tickets Available
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Saturday, April 18, 2026 | 5:30 p.m.
Hilton St. Louis Frontenac