

Fore Sight

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

2026 Visionary Gala: Visions of Hope

The weather was beautiful and the evening spectacular as the Society held our annual **Visionary Gala: Visions of Hope** on Saturday, April 18, at the Hilton St. Louis Frontenac. More than 300 guests who were dressed to the nines gathered in this celebration to raise awareness of the Society's mission, celebrate our clients' successes in achieving their goals, and raise funds in support of vital vision rehabilitation services.

The evening included a cocktail reception, dinner, musical performance, plus a silent and live auction, and the Be a



Missouri native, Joe McBride provided the entertainment

Visionary paddle raise. Local Fox 2 News anchor and journalist, Jasmine Huda, continued in her commitment as gala emcee, and the evening also featured a musical performance provided by Missouri native Joe McBride, of Dallas, Texas. McBride, who lost his eyesight due to

a degenerative eye disease, had the guests tapping their toes with a thundering performance of jazz, blues and R&B.

Gala Co-Chairs, Merrica and Dr. Jonathan Schell, thanked the gala committee and all who assisted in planning and supporting the event's success. Society's Board Chair, Kim White Drost, conveyed her appreciation to the gala guests for their participation, generosity, and commitment.



Merrica and Dr. Jonathan Schell, Gala Co-Chairs

This year's Visionary Gala featured two special honors: the James Butler Award and the Community Light Award.

The James Butler Award, named in honor of a co-founder of the Society, recognizes individuals or groups who have shown



James Butler Award presented to Drs. Nanci and James Bobrow

long, meritorious service on the Board of Directors, advocacy for and referrals to the Society, and positive impact in overall community awareness for the visually impaired. The award was presented to **Drs. Nanci and James Bobrow** for their many years of dedicated service to the St. Louis community.

Nanci Bobrow, Ph.D., is a distinguished psychologist and advocate for children, serving as Assistant Clinical Adjunct Professor of Pediatrics at Saint Louis University School of Medicine. Dr. Bobrow has held numerous local, state and national leadership positions in the areas of child abuse prevention and therapeutic intervention. She served on the

board of the Children's Trust Fund of Missouri, is a former chair of the Task Force on Children's Justice, past president of Prevent Child Abuse Missouri, and executive board member and past board president of the St. Louis Crisis Nursery.

James Bobrow, M.D., is Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, teaches in the University's Medical School and residency program, and is in practice with Complete Eye Care Inc. His research interests include cataract outcomes and the surgical treatment of glaucoma. Dr. Bobrow has taught and lectured on five continents, held numerous leadership roles within the field of ophthalmology, published multiple peer-reviewed journals and edited several books. Dr. Bobrow is a member of the Society's Board of Directors. The Bobrows have shown tremendous generosity to the Society for many years through their contributions and advocacy for the agency's mission.

The Society's Community Light Award is awarded annually to an individual or group whose accomplishments have made immeasurable impact on the blind and visually impaired populations. The award was presented to **Mr. Brett Wilhelm**.



Community Light Award presented to Mr. Brett Wilhelm

Brett has been involved with the Society for many years and currently leads "I Can Tech," one of the Society's peer groups. He serves as President of Sight and Sound Impaired (SASI) of St. Louis, a support organization for DeafBlind individuals and their families, and is the DeafBlind Services Program Manager for Vancro Integrated

Interpreting Services. Brett received his certification to teach assistive technology from World Services for the Blind in Little Rock, Arkansas, and an associate's degree with a certificate in marketing from St. Charles Community College.

The Visionary Gala included silent and live auctions that offered an inviting array of experiences for bid including tickets to the Banana Ball World Tour game in St. Louis, St. Louis City SC ULTRA Club Seats, the St. Louis Cardinals "Green Seats" experience, private wine tasting and curated cocktail events, a custom-prepared chef's dinner for six guests, and travel excursions to Colorful Colorado and the Bourbon Trail in Kentucky.

We would be remiss to not also thank our clients and doctors who shared their Visions of Hope in the gala video: Jack and June Lenk, Madison Taylor, and Diane Wilkins, Dr. Bradley Smith, and Dr. Kate Boland.

Society President and CEO Sharon Mertzlufft conveyed her appreciation for the success of the Visionary Gala, emphasizing the importance of the community's support in the continued strength of the Society's work each day to provide critical vision rehabilitation services. "The gala theme, *Visions of Hope*, represents our clients' perseverance and success in achieving their goals to live independently in ways that are most important and meaningful to them. Their visions of hope inspire us all and remind us that hope is personal, hope is powerful, hope

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changes lives, and hope is a gift that we can give to so many people by supporting the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired.”

THANK YOU TO THE 2026 VISIONARY GALA LEADERSHIP AND SPONSORS

Merrica and Jonathan Schell, MD, Co-Chairs Committee: James Bobrow, MD, Joseph Brinker, Gerald Brooks, Alice Conway, Bing Dempewolf, Betsy Dow, Kimberly White Drost, Beverley Foster, Elizabeth Kauffman, Shannon Lydon, Bradley Smith, MD, Kenneth Tabb, Maria Tabb

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MSB Classmates Robert Wright and Joe McBride Reunite



Jasmine Huda, Emcee



Gillian Roper-Hall Waltman and Drs. Sweta and Pavan Kavali



Dr. Iftiar Chowdhury and Dr. Erin Sieck



Mrs. Joan Musbach (l) and Friends



Mr. and Mrs. Michael McKinnis and Kim White Drost, Board Chair

SLSBVI Welcomes New Board Member

St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired is delighted to welcome to the agency's Board of Directors, Erin Sieck, MD. Dr. Sieck is an Ophthalmologist specializing in Glaucoma and is an Associate Professor with the Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. She completed a Fellowship in Glaucoma at the Washington University School of Medicine, fulfilled her residency in Ophthalmology at the University of Colorado, and received her medical degree from the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine.



Dr. Sieck's clinical interests are dedicated to the treatment and prevention of damage to the eye's optic nerve. She specializes in the medical and surgical aspects of glaucoma, cataracts, and advanced disorders that affect the development of the front of the eye (anterior segment), which includes the cornea, iris, ciliary body, and lens.

Dr. Sieck said, "As a glaucoma specialist I see blindness daily. I joined the Board of the Society because I care about my patients' abilities outside of clinic. After listening to some of my patients' experiences, I knew I had to be a part of such an impactful organization."

Outside of caring for patients, Dr. Sieck enjoys reading historical non-fiction, traveling to international destinations, and eating diverse foods with her husband, Iftiar. Society welcomes Dr. Erin Sieck to our diverse, talented, and dedicated Board of Directors!

Calendar of Events

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

UNITED WORKERS FOR THE BLIND

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

Doors open at 5:30 p.m.

For information, contact **Kay Malmquist 608-436-2610**

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND (Lewis and Clark Chapter)

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

Doors open at 2:30 p.m.

For information, contact **Jenny Carmack, President at 314-239-9776.**

GAMES ACCESSIBLE FOR BLINDNESS (GAB2 and GAB4)

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

For information, contact **Mary Hale / Phone: 314-662-5777 text or voice, Email: meh331@sbcglobal.net**

I CAN TECH

Third Wednesday of the month, 10:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. \$5.00 if staying for lunch. For information, contact **Brett Wilhelm**

Phone: 636-544-5358

Email: bwillhelm2586@gmail.com

ENRICHING OUR LIVES TOGETHER

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

For information, contact **Judy Redlich / Phone: 314-301-7331**

Email: jredlich@slsbvi.org

SIGHT AND SOUND IMPAIRED (SASI)

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

Doors open at 8:30 a.m.

For information, contact **Brett Wilhelm 636-544-5358**

Call the Activity Line to hear this listing and other special events – 314-301-7310



Husband and Wife Team Up to Talk about the Society

Two to tango. Two for the show. Two peas in a pod. The number two is applied to many things that are good in life, including the

partnership between two people.



June and Jack Lenk have been married for many years. The Society has played a large role in their lives, as both are visually impaired. Recently, they took part in a video for the Society and talked about what the Society means to them.

Jack, who has Retinopathy of Prematurity said, "I don't know what it's like to lose your vision. I've never had usable vision." He stressed that the Society is there for people who are in all stages of vision loss.

June said, "I have always been a visually impaired, partially sighted woman. I was told several years ago that I would continue to lose vision and become totally blind. The emotional part is sometimes more significant than the actual loss of your vision. It's just a whole different world for you, and **the Society provides that support and becomes essentially your anchor.**"

Jack ran a vending facility in Hazelwood, and it was June who suggested he contact the Society because the facility was "...way off the street from the bus stop." A Society O&M Specialist helped Jack through training to get from the bus stop and into the building. "I didn't have to figure it out on my own. **Sometimes when you need a lift up, there they are.**"

Jack and June both attend and enjoy the social groups and activities that SLSBVI provides, including the client picnic and holiday party. Jack was an avid participant in the Bookworm Club and takes part in Games Accessible for Blindness (GAB).

June is a teaching assistant and in the future, she plans to volunteer at the Society to work with Braille because that has been her profession. "I'm going to pay it forward. Because of the Society, I am going to be okay."

Thank you, June and Jack, for sharing how the Society has supported your Visions of Hope.

Preschool Caregiver, Advocate, Beauty Queen

It was 2010 when Lakisha Guest first realized she needed glasses. Something



Lakisha Guest Wins Miss Blind Diva: Directors Choice Category

was off with her eyes, but glasses seemed to be the fix.

For a while.

Then in 2018, Lakisha's vision was changing and becoming worse, so her optometrist referred her

to The Retina Institute in St. Louis, a two-hour drive from her hometown of Sikeston, MO. After undergoing tests, she received a diagnosis of Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP). A mouth swab also revealed she had Usher Syndrome Type 2A. RP and Usher Syndrome are commonly diagnosed together.

Retinitis Pigmentosa is a group of rare, genetic eye disorders that cause the light-sensitive cells in the retina to gradually break down, leading to progressive vision loss. Often beginning with night blindness and peripheral vision loss in childhood or young adulthood, it can lead to "tunnel vision" and severe impairment over time.

Usher Syndrome is a rare genetic disorder and the leading cause of combined deafness and blindness, often including balance issues. It is inherited in an autosomal recessive manner, causing progressive vision loss (retinitis pigmentosa) and hearing loss.

These diagnoses were stunning news for Lakisha, and she began to look for ways to cope. She is a mom and a preschool caregiver at Headstart and needed to continue with life.

In 2022, she found St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired, thanks to a referral by The Retina Institute. Lakisha completed her Orientation and Mobility white cane training with the Society and participated in a SLSBVI support group. She found out she wasn't the only person dealing with the gut punch of vision loss. She now had a lifeline.

With her diagnosis, Lakisha has become an advocate for people with low vision. In 2025, she became involved with Eyes Like Mine, Inc, a non-profit in Newark, NJ. The organization strives to empower, enlighten, and innovate communities in New Jersey about vision loss, and they host an annual National Miss Blind Diva Pageant open to visually impaired women all across the country. A friend of Lakisha's nudged her to enter the pageant.

"Why would I do that?" asked Lakisha. "I'm not pretty! What are you talking about?" Lakisha did it anyway, and it turns out she was the first person from Missouri to ever enter the contest.

The City of Sikeston was suddenly abuzz with the news that Lakisha had made it to the finals of the Miss Blind Diva Pageant and was going to represent Missouri in October 2025. Little did she know that gentle nudge would lead her to win the category of Director's Choice for Miss Diva.



Lakisha Working Out at the YMCA

She wears her crown with pride and has continued advocating for the visually impaired in Sikeston.

As soon as Headstart lets out for the summer, she plans to come to St. Louis and attend some of our activities, including the Client Picnic and other events.

Shall We Dance?

The Society is grateful for funds received from a Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis (RAC) grant to support artistic and cultural events for our clients.

LINE DANCING



Diane Wilkins gets her groove on!

On February 25, a line dance instructor from Laced-Up Studio Dance and Fitness offered an hour-long session teaching line dancing to our clients in the Multipurpose room. All enjoyed getting their grooves on.

SMELLING THE BOUQUET

February 27 brought a guided tour of the *Smelling the Bouquet* exhibition at the Missouri Botanical Garden's Stephen and Peter Sachs Museum. The exhibit explored the spectrum of scents that plants create, inspired by the diverse live and scientific collections at the Garden.

RING OF FIRE

On April 9, our clients fell into a Ring of Fire. Not literally of course, but 20 clients, plus one guest were treated to RING OF FIRE: THE MUSIC OF JOHNNY CASH at the Loretto-Hilton Center. This high-spirited musical pays homage to Cash's Arkansas roots and the love, faith, and grit that shaped his storied life.

COMING THIS SUMMER
The annual Client Picnic will take place on June 26.
Date: Friday, June 26
Time: 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.
Place: Brentwood Park Event Pavilion
Address: 2924 Brazeau Ave, St. Louis, MO 63144
Society will provide transportation.
Each client may bring a guest.
Call 314-968-9000 to RSVP and make transportation arrangements, if needed.



The Society and our clients are grateful to The Muny for once again offering free community access tickets to spend an evening out under the stars. These are the five shows for which tickets will be available:

Hairspray – Monday, June 15

South Pacific – Monday, July 6

Disney's Newsies – Monday, July 20

Meet Me in St. Louis – Monday, August 10

Something Rotten! (St. Louis Premiere) – Monday, August 17

Call 314-968-9000 to RSVP. Two tickets per client. Limited number of tickets are available, so call early!

THANK YOU!

The Society gratefully acknowledges philanthropic contributions received from June 1, 2025 through April 30, 2026.

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