

### SOPHIA BRENNER – WORKING TO IMPROVE TRANSPORTATION IN HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

January 2006



*Representative Ed Homan congratulates Sophia Brenner for her award.*

Sophia Brenner, 90, is not one to complain unless she is willing to do what it takes to make a difference. As a person who is legally blind, transportation has been, and continues to be a problem, especially in and around the Valrico neighborhood where she lives. She emphasizes that the problem affects everyone in that area who depends on public transportation, not just those with disabilities. According to her, there is no nearby bus service and alternative transportation is quite limited. As a result, Sophia volunteered to serve on the Hillsborough County Alliance for Citizens with Disabilities where she has been serving for over 10 years. She was recently awarded the Tom Ulvenes Outstanding Community Service Award for her advocacy work to improve public and alternative transportation in Hillsborough County. Sophia was featured receiving her award in the fall

issue of Alliances Views, a newsletter published by the Alliance.

Sophia began losing her eyesight to macular degeneration about 8 years ago. She also has glaucoma and had cataracts removed and replaced with intraocular lenses several years ago. Before retiring and moving to Florida from New York, she worked as a salesperson for Macy's Department Store in New York City for 35 years. She remembers the convenience of New York's mass transit system with pick-ups every 15 minutes. Now, she would be happy if she could catch a nearby bus even if there was only one scheduled pickup per hour. The closest bus stop is on Parsons Avenue in Brandon which is too far for her to get to safely. Sophia now depends heavily upon friends for most of her transportation needs. She also uses the Sunshine Network whenever she can, but says they can only provide her with one-way transportation most of the time for medical appointments and only up to 3:30 p.m. on weekdays. She has a battery-powered mobility scooter, but is limited to using it in her immediate neighborhood. A grocery store is nearby, but getting to it requires crossing busy Highway 60 which has bike lanes, but no sidewalks. Due to the heavy, fast-moving traffic, her orientation and mobility instructor

advised her not to use her scooter to travel along the highway using the bike lanes.

Sophia isn't about to give up – she plans to continue her efforts to improve transportation through her service to the Hillsborough County Alliance for Citizens with Disabilities for as long as she is able. She would also like to see better coordination of efforts between the various organizations working on transportation issues. In addition to her membership with the Alliance, she is also a member of Yes America United and the local chapter of the National Federation of the Blind.

Sophia first sought help from Division of Blind Services in 1997 and was evaluated and provided with some assistive aids and appliances. She was referred to the Lighthouse where she attended classes in daily living skills. She returned for additional classes in 2001 and 2003, taking typing and computer training along with further orientation and mobility training. She lives independently in her Valrico home, preparing her own meals, and managing her household completely on her own. She uses a closed-circuit television system (CCTV) to read her mail. In her spare time, Sophia enjoys listening to talking books and spending time with friends.

# Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind

Tampa • Winter Haven

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Services Contracts  
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Low Vision Clinic  
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Tampa, FL 33606  
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Low Vision Clinic  
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## WHITE CANE SAFETY DAY ACTIVITIES



*White Cane Day participants march down Kennedy Boulevard toward City Hall in downtown Tampa.*



*Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio presents White Cane Safety Day Proclamation to Gloria Mills, President of the Tampa Bay Chapter of National Federation for the Blind.*



*White Cane Day activities also took place in downtown Winter Haven. Some of the sighted participants volunteered to be blindfolded to experience what it is like to be sightless while crossing a street.*

Local White Cane Safety Day marches took place in the downtown districts of Tampa and Winter Haven on October 12<sup>th</sup> to provide much needed public education about the rights of pedestrians who are blind. This law, which is now in all 50 states, requires motorists to yield the right of way to blind persons crossing a street with a white cane or guide dog. Many drivers, however, disregard this law because they are simply not aware of it. A major problem is failure of vehicles that are making turns at intersections to yield to pedestrians, especially right turns on red. Unfortunately, the Tampa Bay area has one of the highest rates of pedestrian fatalities in the nation.

Members of the Tampa Bay Chapter of the National Federation for the Blind and supporters from Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind and Division of Blind Services gathered at the corner of Ashley Drive and Kennedy Boulevard in downtown Tampa, the same location as last year. Most carried informative signs and were escorted across the busy intersections by a police officer. They continued to City Hall to receive a proclamation presented by Mayor Pam Iorio, who spent several minutes with the marchers following the ceremony. Following the meeting with the Mayor, the marchers continued to the County Center where the march ended.

Safety awareness is a critical aspect of mobility training that is provided by the Lighthouse to its clients. Each mobility student who progresses to outside travel involving street crossings is taught to use distinct sounds of traffic patterns as cues for determining when it is safe to cross. They are taught to be patient at busy intersections and to take extra precautions with turning traffic. They are also taught to take alternative routes around intersections that are too dangerous to cross safely.

## MARK HARSHBARGER, WINNER OF THE 2005 FRANK A. MCDONALD MEMORIAL AWARD



*Mark at work on the busy MacDill AFB switchboard answering his share of the many hundreds of calls that come in daily.*

Mark Harshbarger has earned this year's Frank A. McDonald Memorial Award because he is an excellent example of an individual who is blind and has gone well beyond becoming independent and self-supportive. Mark is a very personable, caring individual who is routinely described as one who goes above and beyond the call of duty. The Rotary Club of Tampa presents this award each year to an individual who is blind and has demonstrated "unusual accomplishments toward becoming self-supportive." The award is named after the late Frank A. McDonald, former president and district governor of the Rotary Club. His widow, the late Emily McDonald, established the award because of her strong interest in the welfare of persons who are blind or visually impaired.

Mark lost most of his eyesight 20 years ago as a high school student at the age of 17 when he noticed what appeared to be a dense fog while driving. His vision rapidly deteriorated soon thereafter leaving him legally blind. The cause was atrophy of the optic nerve that was considered to be genetic in nature.

Despite the setback, he continued with his education, earning his high school diploma, then attended Hillsborough Community College, earning an associates degree majoring in business administration. He also attended University of South Florida.

Mark's career started in the restaurant business where he worked as a short-order cook, then at a local Publix, initially bagging groceries, then moved up to training new employees and assisting managers as needed. He decided to seek additional training to improve his job prospects and began attending classes at the Lighthouse in 2002. He was already functioning independently, but wanted to develop his computer skills in order to advance his career. After graduating from the Lighthouse's computer class, he applied for and was hired for the Lighthouse's busy switchboard operation at MacDill Air Force Base in May, 2003 where he successfully worked until moving to Atlanta recently with his wife. He had also worked part-time at Publix.

In addition to working, Mark volunteered his limited spare time for important causes in the community. He assisted the Lighthouse's Summer Transition Program mentoring the teens served by that program. In addition, Mark was a founding member and treasurer of the Hillsborough Advocates for Improved Transit, an organization that provides vital input for the bus system. He had also volunteered for VIP clubs (clubs for visually impaired persons) in the local public schools and served as a role model for students who are blind or visually impaired.

Because the MacDill Air Force Base switchboard operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, Mark was often called when other operators call in sick or for emergencies. His usual 40-hour per week work schedule consisted of afternoon shifts and one midnight shift, but he has worked double and extra shifts whenever the need arose. By all accounts he was a model employee who never hesitated to go the extra mile. He will certainly be missed.

Mark's name will be added to the Frank A. MacDonald Memorial Award plaque, which includes the names of all previous award winners.

### **A LETTER OF APPRECIATION (Summer Youth Program)**

*Dear Lighthouse Staff,*

*I would like to thank all of you for putting together such a wonderful program, Journey to Success. My son, T.J., had the best time this summer and has learned a lot of valuable life skills, and now we know he can actually do laundry and dishes! Without you guys, he probably would not have had the chance to learn all that you have taught him. This year was his second year with the program and he is looking forward to next year. The staff at Atlas Aviation was wonderful too. Again, thank you.*

*Kim Thompson*

# GRADUATES HONORED AT HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS



*Our 2005 Tampa graduates.*

The Lighthouse continued its tradition of honoring its graduates with graduation ceremonies followed by holiday parties in both Winter Haven and Tampa on December 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> respectively. There was lots of food and a graduation cake for dessert at each event. Each graduate was awarded a diploma in the presence of family members and friends who attended. After the presentation of diplomas, graduates and their family members were invited to share their testimonials to the gathering. Several took advantage of the opportunity and gave heart-rending testimonials of how much progress was made in such a short period of time. It was encouraging to hear so many of them describe accomplishments that exceeded their expectations.

At the Tampa graduation party, the Coleman Middle School Orchestra – Chamber Ensemble returned again this year to provide the holiday music. Coleman Middle School has graciously provided wonderful holiday music the last several years at this event, for which we are very grateful. We also wish to thank Whaley’s Market for granting us a very generous discount again this year for the food.

At the 12<sup>th</sup> annual Winter Haven gradua-



*Coleman Middle School Orchestra - Chamber Ensemble provided the holiday music for our Tampa graduation and holiday party.*

tion party, the holiday music was provided by Winter Haven High School Orchestra and Eva Crowder, one of our Rehabilitation Teachers. We wish to thank the State of Florida again for allowing us to use the Nora Mayo Hall in the Florida Citrus Building as they have for all of our past Winter Haven holiday parties. Lunch and cake were served following the graduation ceremony. We invited the children of our Early Intervention Program and their parents to our graduation party again this year and had Santa present to give gifts and meet each of the children. We wish to thank Paul Albright and his wife, Geneva for playing Santa and Mrs. Clause.

For both parties, we also wish to thank our hard-working Lighthouse staff for their efforts in organizing and carrying out these wonderful events. In addition, we would like to express our appreciation to the staff from the Division of Blind Services for attending and participating in these events as they have each year.

## TAMPA GRADUATES

(in alphabetical order)

Elida Barria, Gene Black, David Boggess, Julie Bonney, Renee Calhoon,



*Lunch featured Cuban sandwiches, potato salad, fruit salad, and graduation cake.*

Toni Carver, Ruth Chapman, Helen DePaolo, Martha Dunton, Maria Flores, Thomas Grove, Samuel Henderson, Lois Hull, Aretha Jackson, Diana Knox, Ann Lanning, Maria Louke, Betty Lucey, Mike Maltby, James Mathys, Lori McMillan, Denny Meeks, Tasknee Mitchell, Lillie Owens, Shawn Palmer, Jjeri Plato, Karen Ripley, Suzanne Roberts, Rob Rosal, Radhames Senior, T.R. Smith, Susan Stearns, Rudolph Tolbert, RoseAnn Walker, and Drake Wright.

## WINTER HAVEN GRADUATES

(in alphabetical order)

Linda Adams, Janie Aguilar, Irene Barfield, Tagna Brenton, George Brown, Maggie Burch, Betty Burgess,

## MAGNIFIERS AND MORE STORE CONTINUES EXPANDING MERCHANDISE OFFERINGS



*Diana Knox, Magnifiers and More store clerk, correctly identifies a \$5.00 bill using the Voice-It-All which also identifies colors.*

The Magnifiers and More Store has continued expanding its lineup of merchandise. Not only does the store offer a wide selection of magnifiers, canes, and talking clocks and watches, but it also offers a variety of closed circuit television systems and other electronic viewing systems such as the Jordy, a hands-free magnification system worn as a headset. One of the most interesting



*Luis Perez believes the Jordy viewer will help him with his studies at a local community college.*

items offered by the Store is the electronic hand-held Voice-It-All which correctly identifies currency denominations, most colors, and also serves as a digital voice recorder. It is about the size of a digital camera. Another interesting item is an emergency radio that is powered by a hand-cranked generator along with the back-up battery. There are numerous kitchen gadgets including large print dial timers, measuring devices, scales for weighing food, and meat slicers/carvers. An assortment of stylish, but affordable sunglasses are available.

For the handyman around the home, there is a Handy Hammer with a magnetic nail holder on the head and a separate nail guide. For the musically inclined, there are lessons on cassette tape for learning the guitar, piano, and drums. A Braille labeler is available to label items such as canned foods and other containers. For home security, electronic alarms are available for driveways as well as doorways. Modified games include Dominoes, Scrabble, Bingo, playing cards, and others. Among the countless other items are universal remote controls with large key pads, talking thermometers, and many others.

Even though the selection of merchandise for the store is geared toward persons who are blind or visually impaired, customers without visual disabilities would likely find items of interest as well. The Magnifiers and More Store hours are from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

## GRADUATES HONORED (continued from Page 4)



*Our 2005 Winter Haven graduates.*

Greg Burnett, Imogene Desrosiers, Angel Felix, Yolanda Hernandez, Juanita Hilborn, Geneva Hill, April Kemker, Amanda Lake, Donnie Lewis, Alex Melendez, Neilson Miller, Clarence



*Winter Haven High School Orchestra provided holiday music for our Winter Haven graduation and holiday party.*

Moore, Bill Nefcy, Adolfo Pena, Linda Perez, Ceres Ranola, Bill Renfranz, Lola Righton, Robert Rosier, Avalon Roth, Evon Thomas, and Bobby Trammell.



*Santa and Mrs. Clause were the star attractions for our youngest clients.*

## BECKI FORSELL, UNITED WAY OF TAMPA BAY'S 2005 VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR IN HUMAN SERVICES, RECEIVES ADDITIONAL AWARDS



*Becki Forsell, State Representative Kevin Ambler, and other members of YES! of America United proudly display the organization's new T-shirt.*

Becki Forsell lost most of her eyesight several years ago from diabetes, but she has turned this life chapter into a golden opportunity to give back. She shares with the community in a big way by serving as an advocate for others with disabilities. As the founder/volunteer executive director of Yes! Of America United, Inc., she is teaching others with disabilities how to stand up for themselves and find satisfaction by being involved in their community. Yes! of America United is dedicated to enriching the lives of people with disabilities and encouraging positive change in their lives and the community as a whole.

Becki has served in many capacities including: Chair of the Grassroots of Hillsborough County, Community Action Transportation Taskforce, Missing children's taskforce, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America taskforce on church and disability, member of the Hillsborough Alliance for Citizens with Disability, Mayor's Alliance, and attendee of housing and supported employment meetings. She currently is working on an Awareness Outreach Project with the Florida Developmental Disability Council with fellow members identifying opportunities in the community for persons with disabilities. In her leadership capacities, she has made numerous presentations at workshops,



*Becki Forsell receiving her President's Points of Light award from Florida State Representative Kevin Ambler and Betty Tribble, Volunteer Coordinator of United Way of Tampa Bay.*

conferences, conventions, public hearings, and local organizations. And of course with the support of YES! of America United members, they have also participated in many other boards, meetings, and given back to their community this past year. In return YES! has given the members tickets or gift certificates to the symphony, plays, movies, sports events, and restaurants, all received as in-kind gifts from many organizations in our community including The Florida Symphony, Hillsborough Art Guild, Movie companies, and restaurants such as Whistle Junction and Lone Star Steakhouse. YES! members have volunteered with Prevent Blindness Walk, Freedom Playground, Sincerely Santa, and Volunteer Florida's Sulphur Springs Library for the Boys and Girls Club. Because of her efforts, United Way of Tampa Bay has named her 2005 Volunteer of the Year (human services) and nominated her for the Governor's Points of Lights Award and the President's Points of Lights Awards. In addition, Becki was awarded the Allen P. Wesley Award for Exemplary Partnership and Leadership by her peers at her graduation on Nov. 19th

from Partners in Policymaking under the Developmental Disabilities Council.

On December 14<sup>th</sup>, Becki and YES! of America United received the Presidential National Points of Light award for volunteerism and community mobilization. To her surprise she was informed that Governor Bush also awarded her and YES! the Florida Points of Light for the week beginning Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>. While Becki felt somewhat overwhelmed by all the attention that has suddenly been focused on her, she is wasting no time in putting it to use to further her efforts to help others with disabilities improve their lives.

Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind is proud to highlight Becki's accomplishments since her rehabilitation began in 1997 with independent living classes; she later served as a volunteer and worked there in a temporary paid position. Previously, she was a Wal-Mart department manager for over 6 years prior to her vision loss. She returned to the Lighthouse recently to take computer classes and learn JAWS, a speech program that converts text into speech on a computer. She will be using these skills initially to enrich the programs for YES! of America United.

### **THE LIGHTHOUSE NEWSLETTER AVAILABLE ON WEBSITE**

*The Lighthouse* newsletter, available on our website at [www.tampalighthouse.org](http://www.tampalighthouse.org) is "Bobby-Approved" meaning that it meets widely-accepted standards of accessibility for persons with disabilities. A PDF (Adobe Personal Document Format) version of *The Lighthouse* is also available via email upon request.

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Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind truly appreciates all of our donors. All contributors support programs and services at Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind. Although we can only list contributors who give gifts totaling \$50 or more, we are grateful for each gift. The names listed below include those whose contributions were received between July 1, 2005 and December 31, 2005. If we have inadvertently omitted or misspelled your name, we apologize and ask that you please let us know by calling (813) 251-2407.

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## IN-KIND

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*We thank the following contributors for choosing Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind as a means of expression to honor or memorialize a friend or loved one.*

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Rosemary Cook  
**Tomasita Cacciatore**  
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**Joseph A. Coppala**  
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**National Industries for the Blind (NIB)**

## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

**January 16**  
**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**  
**Day observed (closed)**

**February 11**  
**Low Vision Expo**  
**9:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon**  
**Christ the King Catholic Church**  
**821 S. Dale Mabry Hwy.**  
**Tampa, FL 33609**  
**Call (813) 251-2407 for more  
information**

**April - May (TBA)**  
**18th Annual Beepball Classic**

**May 29**  
**Memorial Day observed (closed)**

## **Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind**

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