

The logo picture is inside a light-yellow circle, with words at the top and bottom in large, upper case, bold black letters. The top of the circle reads, ‘A HAND UP NOT A HANDOUT.’ Under the circle, the words are, ‘GEORGIA COUNCIL OF THE BLIND.’

In the center of the circle is a pencil drawing in grey tones, of the palm of an open right hand cradling a Georgia peach. At its top, from the left side of a short brown stem, a thin green leaf hangs down and over the thumb. The peach has colors like the warmth of the sun. The vivid yellow and orange colors contrast with the black, upper case letters GCB in the middle of the

peach, with corresponding Braille dots directly under the three letters.

The GCB DIGEST

A publication of the Georgia Council of the Blind

An affiliate of the American Council of the Blind,

An organization promoting a hand up and not a handout.

Summer 2022



This picture contains the following people:

Cecily Laney Nipper, Betsy Grenevitch, and her guide dog James, Marsha Farrow, and Kathy Morris.

GCB Officers for 2021-2024:

Cecily Laney Nipper, GCB President, 470-218-7885, roses828@comcast.net

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Cecily Nipper, Senior, GCB Assistant Secretary, 770-786-1551, sparklenipper@gmail.com

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From Your Editor
By Amanda Wilson

Hello, GCB family. We thank each one who has submitted articles in this issue of our magazine. If you have any change of address, telephone number, email address, or desired change of format, please inform our GCB treasurer.

Thanks to everyone who makes our GCB Digest such a considerable success. I particularly want to thank Janet Parmerter, Assistant Editor, for her editing skills and for the many hours she has worked on the magazine. I want to thank our President, Cecily Laney Nipper, for her presidential message with information about momentous events, legislation, and projects. I also appreciate the contributions from our new GCB Digest committee, each member who sent articles, and those who made suggestions.

Note: The GCB Digest is now on NFB Newsline and on the Georgia Radio Reading Service, GARRS.

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The Georgia Council of the Blind has a new Instagram account! Please check it out! To find it, search on Instagram for gacounciloftheblind. That represents ‘GA Council of the Blind’ without spaces and in all lower-case letters.

GCB Presidential Message

By Cecily Laney Nipper

Recently, I had the privilege of attending the American Council of the Blind annual conference and convention thanks to the JP Morgan Chase Fellowship, a leadership scholarship provided to five ACB members per year so that they can attend the convention to develop their leadership potential. It was my pleasure to represent Georgia as the delegate as well, and I thank Phil Jones for serving as alternate delegate and stepping up when needed. Running for the ACB board of directors was a unique experience, and I appreciate the support of the Georgia Council of the Blind, even though I was not elected this year. Among my favorite sessions were the mental health session where I had the chance to hear Dr. Pam Shaw, chair of the newly formed ACB Mental Health and Well-being committee, speak about how all of us have our mental health challenged and must employ coping strategies to move to the next phase of wholeness each day.

On Wednesday of convention, the JP Morgan Chase classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022 attended a private reception. This was a real chance for camaraderie and sharing among the award recipients who were available to attend. Kenneth Semien, Sr., chair, as well as committee members Zelda Gebhard and Anthony Akamine, who served us made us feel so welcome and valued. Favorite quotes were shared; mine: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent,” by Eleanor Roosevelt. This is at the core of my leadership style as I believe we all struggle with our own worth at times and need the validation that comes from within us, from the kindness of friends, family, and strangers, and, for me, from spiritual comfort at the heart of all I do. As we move into the season to be planning for our GCB state conference and convention being held in Cartersville, Georgia November 10-12, 2022, let’s all seek to be a light in our own communities helping others wherever we can. It is these small kindnesses that build a better world. (Can you tell I came back from convention inspired?) My best to all of you until we meet again at our next online or in person opportunity!

Georgia Council of the Blind Special Board/Membership Meeting

Monday, October 4, 2021

Call to Order, First Vice-President Phil Jones: Phil called the meeting to order at 8:05 PM.

Invocation, Phil Jones: Phil led us in the invocation.

Roll Call, Betsy Grenevitch: Those present were: Philip Jones, first vice-President; Jamaica Miller, Second Vice-President; Betsy Grenevitch, Secretary; Marsha Farrow, Treasurer: Valerie Hester, Member-At-Large Representative; Keith Morris, GCB Immediate Past President; Jerrie Toney, Athens Chapter; Kathy Morris, Augusta Chapter; Cecily Nipper, Jr., East Georgia Chapter; Judy Presley, Greater Hall County Chapter; Sharon Nichols, Northwest Chapter; Tonia Clayton, Rome-Floyd County Chapter; Tiyah Longmire, South Atlanta Chapter; Marj Schneider, Savannah Chapter; Amanda Wilson \_GCB \_Digest Editor; and Steve Longmire, Webmaster.

Guests present were Debbie McDonald, Janet Parmerter, Keith Parmerter, Tom Ridgeway, Debbie Young, Chris Holbrook and Marleen—Jamaica’s helper.

The Upcoming GCB Conference and convention Everyone:

The purpose for this meeting was to decide whether people are planning on attending the upcoming GCB conference and convention in person as some have said they would not be attending in person. Phil asked for an update from the convention committee.

Marsha Farrow said that most of the plans for the conference and convention are in place. Kay McGill is planning on attending the event over Zoom.

Cecily said that we would not lose our contract if we moved it to the spring and used the same facility.

Most people on the call are planning on attending the conference and convention in person.

Elections, Everyone: Marj explained that our elections are to be held in even number years, but we were unable to do that in 2020 because of COVID. Also, Constitution also says we must vote in person. There will be proposed changes to our Constitution and Bylaws recommended at our upcoming business meeting.

Marj made a motion that the officers who will be elected at our upcoming conference and convention in November would serve a three-year term which means their term of service would expire in 2024. Keith seconded the motion and the motion carried.

Conference and Convention Update, Cecily Nipper, Jr.: We will be having a live harpist at the reception.

Live Auction, Debbie Young: Debbie is excited about helping with the auction. Marsha stressed that any donation is welcome no matter how small it is.

Support: Phil asked for our support as he leads GCB until Alice, or the new president can take over.

Adjourn: Cecily made a motion seconded by Janet Parmerter to adjourn. We adjourned at 8:40 PM EST.

Respectfully submitted by

Betsy Grenevitch, GCB Secretary

GEORGIA COUNCIL OF THE BLIND BOARD MEETING MINUTES

Saturday, January 15, 2022

The meeting was called to order by President Cecily Laney Nipper at 10:08 AM.

 Sharon Nichols gave the invocation.

The roll call was given with the following attending:  Cecily Laney Nipper, President; Marj Schneider, 1st Vice-President; Judy Presley, 2nd Vice-President; Kathy Morris, Secretary; Cecily Nipper, Sr., Assistant Secretary; Marsha Farrow, Treasurer; Betsy Grenevitch, Member at Large Representative; Alice Ritchhart, Past President; Jamaica Miller, Athens Chapter; Deborah Lovell, Augusta Chapter; Philip Jones, East Georgia Chapter;  Mike Hall, Greater Hall County Chapter; Sharon Nichols, Northwest Chapter; Amanda Wilson, Rome Floyd County Chapter; Ann Pippen, Savannah Chapter, Tiyah F.M. Longmire, South Atlanta Chapter; DJ McIntyre, Georgia Guide Dog Users; Steve Longmire, GCB Web Master; Janet Parmerter, Assistant Editor; Jerrie Toney, Finance Committee Chair, Kim Charlson, Guest.

A moment of silence was held in honor of Robin Oliver from the Athens Chapter that had passed away.

Cecily Laney Nipper asked for a motion to accept the agenda that was sent out, with the amendment of the moment of silence being added. A motion to accept the amended agenda was made by Jamaica Miller and seconded by Phil Jones and was approved.

As Kim Charlson was not on the call at this time, this matter was moved until she became available.

Cecily Laney Nipper gave the President’s report. She stated that everyone was supportive in the change and that she appreciates all the help from everyone. There are many things going on in the different committees. She wants to be at as many different chapters as possible in person or on the phone to get to know the membership. We are getting calls for assistance, mostly from adults. She will do her best to ensure needs are met as we are able.

President Nipper also made the committee assignments as follows:

Senior Fund; Marsha Farrow; Youth committee – no one is currently willing to fulfil this role. She will be discussing how to handle the funds later in the meeting. Finance – Jerrie Toney; Membership and Projects – Amanda Wilson and Sharon Nichols; Technology – Steve Longmire; Digest – Amanda Wilson; Public Relations – Mike Hall; Legislative – Alice Ritchhart; Braille Projects – Phil Jones; Awards – Judy Presley.

Secretary’s Report Kathy Morris:

DJ McIntyre read the August minutes. Motion was made by Alice Ritchhart and seconded by Marsha Farrow to approve the minutes. A correction was given that the Conference and Convention Committee was chaired by Cecily Laney Nipper, not Cecily Nipper Senior. Corrections were accepted and motion passed. November minutes were read by Kathy Morris, GCB Secretary. Motion was made by Phil Jones and seconded by Marsha Farrow to approve the minutes. Correction was given to add 2nd Vice-President Jamaica Miller to the list of board members. The correction was accepted, and the minutes were approved.

Treasurer’s Report, Marsha Farrow:

The amount in the general operating fund is $4,483.07. The GCB conference has $3,075.92 with a pending deposit, +++++of $20.00 to give it a grand total of $3,095.92. The CD balance is $5,072.16. The long-term investment balance is $16,862.29 and Way financial balance is $73,553.61. Motion was made to file the report for audit, and it was approved. Marsha Farrow spoke about the struggle the organization has had trying to get insurance for the directors and officers. Found the company called Postal through the Hartford group that has a yearly cost of $1,094.00. Marsha Farrow made a motion to obtain the insurance and was seconded by Marj Schneider. Deborah Lovell questioned why the insurance was needed and Marsha explained what would be covered. The motion was approved.

Senior Fund Committee, Marsha Farrow and Jerrie Toney:

 They have helped five people. They have been able to provide computers to four people and have helped one person with transportation to the convention. DJ McIntyre spoke about assisted listening devices. She has found a unit that has one transmitter and six receivers for $229.99. These can be used at all board meetings and conventions. Alice Ritchhart made a motion for the Senior Fund to purchase the equipment. The motion was seconded by Deborah Lovell and passed.

Youth Fund Committee Cecily Laney Nipper proposed to move the money under the Youth Fund to the Scholarship account until a time that it is needed. Alice Ritchhart made a motion to that effect and was seconded by Judy Presley and was passed.

Finance Committee, Jerrie Toney:

DJ McIntyre read the budgets. The 2021 auction will be added to the fundraisers total. Phil Jones made a motion to approve the budget, Jamaica Miller seconded, and it was approved.

Scholarship Report, Marj Schneider:

 The Alfred and Cora Camp scholarship is now starting again this year.  March 1st is the due date.

Membership/Projects, Amanda Wilson:

  Currently we are working on collecting glasses for the Lions Lighthouse.  Please get them to Cecily Laney Nipper.

We are currently at 110 members, and we previously had 144.   Marsha spoke about lifetime memberships.  She proposed having State lifetime memberships at $100.  Alice made this proposal into a motion, and it was seconded by Amanda Wilson.  Discussion – Deborah Lovell suggested that the motion be given to the membership and finance committee to determine what the correct amount should be for a lifetime member. The motion was withdrawn and was referred to those committees.

Speaker Kim Charlson came on and spoke about Braille and gave some history. There have been new developments concerning the influence of Charles Barbier on the development of the Braille code as he may have never visited the France’s Institute during the formative years of Braille.

There is a new Braille E-reader that is in use.  The audio description project is ongoing and active.  The Winter Olympics will be audio described.

Braille Projects, Phil Jones:

They are looking at finding out how many are Braille users in each chapter.  They are also wanting to know what each chapter did for World Blind Day.

Due to the lateness of time, it was decided to move all other items to the next board meeting except for deciding when and where to have the next meeting and the Legislative committee.

The next board meeting should be held on the 3rd Saturday in April, but that is the weekend of Easter, and it is felt that there would be too much other activity that day.  It was moved by Marj Schneider to have the next board meeting on Saturday, April 30, 2022. The motion was seconded by Deborah Lovell and was passed.

Legislative Committee, Alice Ritchhart:

The Blind Day at the Capital will be February 8th at 8:20 at the Coverdell building in Room 307.  The two items we are working for is the Commission for the Blind Bill.  Senator Davenport will be putting it forth.  We are also seeking to have the absentee ballots to be made totally accessible for private voting.  Democracy Live will be there.   Please invite your representatives to attend. DJ McIntyre made a motion to adjourn and was seconded by Jamaica Miller and was passed. The meeting was adjourned at 12:30 PM.

GCB Chapter News

The Athens Chapter:

The Athens Chapter reported that they gathered on Saturday, June 26, 2022, for lunch at the Hilltop Grill in Athens.  The group enjoyed a wonderful lunch and great company!

The Athens chapter meetings are held by conference call at present on the fourth Saturday of every month at 10:30 AM. The call-in number is 605-313-4818 and the access code is 463476#.

For more information about the Athens Chapter please contact Jerrie Toney at (706) 461-1013 or jerriemt2@gmail.com.

The Augusta Chapter:

The Augusta Chapter reported that they were asked to participate in an exciting project of creating tactile portraits. A group of medical students from Augusta University, Medical College of Georgia worked with our chapter. The students started out by scanning 3D printed face models of each of our members and their family members. From the 3D images they will cast the tactile mold of each member. Their plan is to create an individual and family portrait for each chapter member. Their chapter is still meeting virtually but they have gotten together several times for dinner and fellowship. They are looking forward to having Cecily Laney Nipper, GCB President, to join their next fellowship dinner.

For more information, about the Augusta Chapter please contact Deborah Lovell at 706-726-4054, or via email at lovell.d2000@gmail.

The East Georgia Chapter:

The East Georgia Chapter reported that at their April meeting they welcomed Erick Smith, assistive technology trainer, braille teacher, and founder of Leoto, a nonprofit organization that provides training, for free, to blind and visually impaired people and their supporters. He is also an accomplished jazz musician and played a couple of songs for us on the call. At their May meeting, they welcomed guest speaker Kristin White, State Director of the Georgia Library Services for the Blind and Print Disabled. Their June meeting was in person where their program included special guest speaker Rachel Ruckart, Director of GARRS. The East Georgia Chapter now meets in person every second Saturday of the month at 10:00 AM. Their meeting is held at the Conyers Presbyterian Church, which is located at 911 North Main Street, Northwest, in Conyers, Georgia. Zoom component is still available for those who wish to remain virtual. We gave a huge congratulations and big round of applause for East Georgia Chapter’s favorite guide dog, Shadow, for winning an award for a Furry Skilled Professional class of 2022 at the national ACB convention. Congratulations Cecily Laney Nipper and Shadow!

Below is a black and white photo of Cecily Laney Nipper standing next to her guide dog Shadow accepting Shadow's award at the ACB Convention.



For more information about the East Georgia Chapter, please contact Phil Jones at 770-713-3306, or via email at Brilman1952@gmail.com.

The Greater Hall County Chapter:

The Greater Hall County Chapter reported that at their April meeting, they welcomed back Jason Bombelyn with Visual Enhancements along with some new low vision and blindness devices. Among other items, Jason demonstrated the Patriot Vision and the Lyric OCR. Attendees were welcome to hold and sample the devices. At our May meeting, they welcomed Dr. Taylor Rossow, with Advanced Eye Center. Dr. Rossow gave an in-depth talk about glaucoma, the “silent killer of the eyes”.  She finished the meeting with a lively question and answer session. At their June meeting they held their annual picnic luncheon at O’Charley’s. Their Calling Team members were recognized for their hard work reminding members of meetings and events. The team members include Jane Bell, Ted Brackett, Lana Carder and team leader, Don Linnartz. They will not meet in July or August, as members have full summer schedules. Their September meeting will be on Saturday, September 10, 2022, beginning at 10:30 AM. Judy Presley, their vice-president, attended the 2022 American Council of the Blind, ACB, Convention. They hope to have her as a speaker in the fall to recap her experiences. Judy and Hoyal had to buy a new washing machine this year.  They searched at many stores until they finally found a Samsung front-load washer with Braille next to the power button and start button, along with chimes sounds when the temperature button is pressed. Judy said the washer can be linked up with a smart phone, but she said she is glad to operate it the old-fashioned way. Don Linnnartz, transitioned to the Assisted Living of Lanier Village Estates in May. Steve and Bonnie Bruce celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a trip to Belgium in June. Suzanne Schilling informed us that, effective July 1, Hall Area Transit’s WeGo ride share service expanded its hours of operation. New hours are 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. They welcome new members, Stan Kozyra and his brother, Jeff. They also welcome several returning members since the end of the COVID-19 restrictions. Their guest speakers are live-streamed each month by treasurer, Roy Carder. Archived videos can be viewed on our Facebook page, Greater Hall GCB. The Greater Hall County Chapter meetings are held on the second Saturday of each month, at 10:30 AM until 12:00 PM. Their meetings are held at the Smoky Springs Retirement Residences, which is located at 940 South Enota Drive, in Gainesville, Georgia 30501. For more information, about the Greater Hall County Chapter please contact Judy Presley at 706-400-2185, or via email at hoyal@windstream.net.

The Northwest Georgia Chapter:

The Northwest Chapter reported that they are still meeting in person at the bank. They are working on creating a Facebook page and creating business cards with our logo for their chapter.

For more information, about the Northwest Chapter, please contact Sharon Nichols at sharonnichols347@icloud.com.

The Rome Floyd County Chapter:

For more information, about the Rome Floyd County Chapter, please contact Amanda Wilson at 770-547-4700, or via email at moonrocks@bellsouth.net.

The Savannah Chapter:

For more information, about the Savannah Chapter, please contact Marj Schneider at 912-352-1415, or via email at marjschneider@bellsouth.net.

The South Metro Chapter:

The South Metro Chapter reported that they are still meeting at the Piccadilly Cafeteria, which is located at 2000 Crescent Center Boulevard, Tucker, Georgia, on the second Tuesday, at 4:00 PM, until 6:00 PM.

For more information, about the South Metro Chapter please contact Brent Reynolds at 404-814-0768, or via email jbr53@samobile.net.

Georgia Guide Dog Users News

By Marj Schneider

Georgia Guide Dog Users held our spring membership meeting this year via Zoom on Saturday June 4. After a productive business meeting we heard from our guest speaker, Carla Campbell, a canine massage therapist working in the Bay Area. Carla has been a professional Canine massage therapist for more than 20 years.

During this time, in addition to working with top national and international show and agility dogs, countless older pets and dogs recovering from orthopedic surgery, she has had the opportunity to massage hundreds of guide dogs at national blindness conventions.

Carla spoke first about some of the physical stresses our dogs may experience while they are guiding. Things like walking in the controlled way we ask of them, walking largely on pavement, going up and down stairs and lying still for long periods can all be physically stressful over time, and though our working dogs are accustomed to such activities, they can have a negative impact as dogs age. Carla detailed other factors that we can also pay attention to that can lessen the impact of the physical stressors our dogs face. These include: keeping them at a healthy weight, keeping their nails short and providing opportunities for them to exercise off leash.

Massage techniques that we can use on a regular basis, along with helping to keep our dogs comfortable and their muscles relaxed, offer the benefit of a thorough check for any lumps, bumps, cuts or swelling that we might otherwise miss.

Carla talked through several techniques that she calls bus stop massage that we can do during those times when we find ourselves waiting with our dogs, waiting for a ride, waiting for a meeting to start, waiting for an appointment… She stressed that all of these techniques are done slowly and with light pressure, and without forcing cooperation from a dog who doesn’t like a particular activity. All of her descriptions of these methods, starting at the dog’s ears and moving around to the spine, chest and legs, were thorough and memorable. I can hardly wait for the opportunity to try out all of them on my next dog, whom I hope to meet soon.

If you would like a recorded copy of Carla’s presentation, please contact me at, <marjschneider@bellsouth.net>

For more information, about the Georgia Guide Dog Users group please contact Marj Schneider, 912-352-1415 or via email at marjschneider@bellsouth.net.

GCB Community Phone Calls:

The Georgia Council of the Blind is holding community phone calls. The phone number for all the GCB community calls is 1-605-562-0400, and the access code is 780-5751, followed by the pound sign. If you cannot get in, then use the alternative phone number. It is 1-717-275-8940 and the access code is 7805751, followed by the pound sign.

Here is the schedule for GCB community phone calls.

Reading with Touch:

Betsy Grenevitch will discuss all things associated with Braille. This call will be on the second Monday of every month at 7:00 pm.

Praise and Prayer:

Mike Hall will lead us in praise and prayer on the third Tuesday of the month at 7:00 PM.

GCB Book Club:

Debra Lovell and Judy Presley

Since the COVID epidemic, our GCB book club has been active for several months and we have read a wide variety of books. These include fiction, nonfiction, as well as biographies. Sometimes when you read a delightful book, you feel like you just must share it with others. This is what makes book clubs so much fun. That is why we encourage our members to suggest their favorite books and would love to have other book lovers out there to join us. We meet the fourth Thursday of each month at 7:30.

GCB Peach Talk

From the Membership and Project Committee:

In March, the membership and project committee discussed having an event on the ACB Community to inform others what GCB is all about. Since then, we have had three ACB-GCB community phone calls. In May, we had members from our nine chapters, some committees and our two special affiliates to talk about what they are doing in Georgia. In June, we discussed our favorite peach recipes and had a round of Georgia related trivia. In July, we discussed our favorite places to visit in Georgia.

GCB In Memory of

Robin Elaine Oliver, age 64, of Athens, Georgia passed away on Monday, January 3, 2022. Robin was born on October 8, 1957. Robin Oliver was a long-time member of GCB. She was a state officer was well.

Wendi Elizabeth Wilson, 52, of Summerville, passed away on Monday, February 22, 2022, in a Rome Hospital. She was born in Floyd County, Georgia. Wendi Wilson was a long-time member of the Rome Floyd County Chapter of GCB.

GCB Profile of Donna Brown, our board liaison

By Cecily Laney Nipper

Please allow me to introduce Donna Brown, elected to the ACB Board of Directors for an unexpired term in 2020 and then 2021 for first official term. From Romney, West Virginia a small town of 3000 people 25-30 miles from the nearest Walmart, Donna shares our issues with transit, with only one Uber/Lyft driver in the area and one bus with a limited schedule. As readers know, many counties do not yet have paratransit or any transit at all. The help of friends and family is what we in the blind community count on.

Pottstown, Pennsylvania is the town where Donna grew up, about 30 miles west of Philadelphia. She attended the Overbrook School for the Blind through K-12. Kutztown University in Pennsylvania is her alma mater with a double major in a Teacher of the Visually Impaired program and Elementary Education.

After applying for any openings in surrounding states, Donna took a job at the West Virginia School for the Blind where she taught for 37 years. (West Virginia School for the Blind often sought teachers from Kutztown University.) What an amazing career! Donna has three siblings, two of whom are blind, and her mother lives with her in West Virginia. Her mother moved in with her after her retirement. Donna has two nieces in Virginia and Texas.

Before coming to West Virginia, Donna knew nothing of ACB. After being in West Virginia for two years, the Mountain State Council of the Blind was having its convention in Harper’s Ferry, and a lady from the school where Donna worked asked her if she was interested in going. She really enjoyed the people and joined, attending her first National Convention in 1987 in Los Angeles with the same friend who originally invited her to the state convention. Just goes to show what leaders we might recruit by just inviting someone to come with us to an event or meeting.

In 2007 there was a resurgence of activity in the Mountain State Council. Around 2011 Donna was elected president of the Mountain State Council for the first time, serving three two-year terms. She is now in that position once again serving her second term this time around.

We were honored that Donna agreed to become the Georgia Council of the Blind board liaison from the American Council of the Blind board of directors. Donna was on the board just prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic and has a unique perspective on what our organization and our world has been going through. She attended her first board meeting in fall 2019 in Chicago. At that meeting, the new steering committees were introduced to board members. This was an information-packed board meeting. Much of her energy since that time has been devoted to her position as member lead on the ACB Membership steering committee. Each steering committee has a member lead, who will be a member of the board; each steering committee has a staff lead person (Cindy Hollis, for example, for membership steering committee). All board members serve on various steering committees. Some related committees reside under the membership steering committee including: ACB Membership Committee, Berl Colley Leadership Training Committee, Community Support Committee, ACB Women Committee among others. The steering committee meets once a month for reports from chairs and goal setting. Donna’s primary responsibility is to send out the information on the meetings and take notes to send out to the committee.

With her free time, Donna is the Sunday School Director and sings in the choir at Covenant Baptist Church right outside of Romney West Virginia. She is a member of the Romney Lion’s Club as well as serves on the board of the local sheltered workshop. In leisure time, Donna enjoys exercising regularly at the local gym.

One of her most well-known roles is chair of the ACB Walk Committee. The committee meets once a month, organizing the ACB Brenda Dillon Memorial Walk, an event that takes place at each ACB National Convention. The primary goal of the walk is as a fundraiser for ACB, but affiliates can also benefit from a portion of the funds, creating walk teams where up to 50% of the money the affiliate’s team raises comes back to the affiliate. Individual and team websites are set up that can be sent out for prospective donors.

One of the inspirations for the Georgia Council of the Blind membership projects committee Peach Talk call that we have been doing for a couple of months on the ACB Community was It’s 7-up Time call that Mountain State Council has been doing since June of 2020 on second Monday of the month. This is a fun variety call with a topic each month. It is our honor to have Donna Brown representing us on the ACB board of directors!

GCB Member Profile: Leah Streams

By Amanda Wilson

Welcome to Leah Streams, who is the newest member of the Rome Floyd County Chapter of the Georgia Council of the Blind, GCB. Leah Streams is seventeen years old. She attends Pepperell High School in the Floyd County School System. She heard about GCB through Rebecca Cowan-Story, who is the teacher of students with hearing impairments at Pepperell High School. Leah states that she got involved with GCB to assist other students like herself to be “well rounded’ individuals. Leah will be a senior this coming school year. After that she intended to attend either Reinhardt College or Kennesaw State College to major in fine arts. She likes to sing, act, and play piano. She had a solo song in the play at her school last month. Leah was born in Frankfort, Germany since her parents were stationed there in the army. She has attended public schools and three schools for the blind in Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia. She lives with her mother Kasandra, her stepdad Jeff, and many siblings. Leah is a reader. She likes to read all types of books. She likes to read braille and to listen to auditory books as well.

If you have more questions for Leah, you can contact her at 706-676-5518, or via email at leahstreams04@gmail.com.

GCB Suzanne Schilling’s Trip on Public Transportation

By Dianne Roberts

Suzanne Schilling, who is a Member of the Greater Hall County Chapter, took a trip in March to Jacksonville, Florida, to visit friends.  Below is her trip story as told to Dianne Roberts.

My guide dog, Ida, and I took a trip from Gainesville, Georgia to Jacksonville, Florida, in March of this year for a visit with friends.  We left my apartment at 6:30 a.m. and rode the WeGo ride share van over to the Amtrak station in Gainesville.  Amtrak only stops in Gainesville at 7:30 a.m. each day going south toward Atlanta, so we arrived early.  When Amtrak got to Atlanta, we left the train and walked right over to the MARTA Bus station nearby.  We boarded the bus and rode a short way to the MARTA Train station.  The bus driver instructed me how to walk to the MARTA station elevator.  Ida and I took the elevator right down to the MARTA train boarding platform.  We boarded the train and rode to the Atlanta Civic Center Station.  We got off the train and walked right to the elevator which took us up to the Megabus station at street level.  When it was time, we boarded the Megabus there in Atlanta and rode about three hours south to Tifton, Georgia, where there was a rest stop. The bus driver kindly directed Ida and me to a dog relief area directly ahead of where our bus was parked, and I was thankful for that!  A short time later, we reboarded and finished the trip to Jacksonville, arriving around 3:00 p.m.  My friends were waiting for us at the Megabus station, and we left for a good, week-long visit. When Ida and I left Jacksonville to come back home, we reversed the whole transportation process.  We left Jacksonville by 4:00 p.m. and arrived back in Gainesville at 11:30 p.m.  The Amtrak train only stops in Gainesville at 11:30 p.m. each night going north.  Since it was after hours for WeGo, we took a local taxi from the station to my apartment.  Ida and I were safely settled back home by 12:30 a.m. The roundtrip transportation costs were pretty reasonable.  Amtrak train fare was $31.00.  Megabus fare was $70.00.  MARTA train and bus fares were $8.00.  WeGo rideshare was $2.00.  The after-hours taxi fare was $5.00.  The total cost for transportation was $116.00. All in all, the process was fairly easy because I have used these transportation services in the past.  I made my reservation on the telephone, talking to live representatives, and I paid with a credit card.  For MARTA, I used a prepaid Breeze card, which I swiped when boarding.  I have some usable sight and my guide dog so traveling gives me a strong sense of confidence and independence.  I also found that, when asked, people were very willing to assist me.

 Suzanne’s tips:

Know the transportation service schedules and plan your trip accordingly. Be organized.  Make reservations and payments before your trip. Allow yourself extra time so when the occasional glitch occurs, you will not become overstressed. Do not be afraid to ask for assistance. keep asking around your community to find services you can use to achieve more independence.

2022 Al and Cora Camp Scholarships

By Marj Schneider

On April 30 at our spring meeting of the Georgia Council of the Blind board, two students were each awarded $1000 scholarships to assist with their college expenses. GCB has been able to offer this scholarship to blind and low vision students for many years because of the dedication of GCB members Al and Cora Camp, their years of helping to raise funds and providing the solid foundation that scholarship programs need to continue.

I want to thank the members who served on the scholarship committee with me this year: Granger Ricks, Deborah Lovell, Jamaica Miller and Tom Ridgeway. It’s so helpful to have a group to discuss and evaluate the applications we receive. We are pleased to award this year’s scholarships to Kaylee Caraway of Ringgold, Georgia and to Jill King of Statesboro, Georgia.

Kaylee Caraway graduated in May from Heritage High School in Ringgold, Georgia. The committee was impressed with the recommendation letters written for her by her teacher for the visually impaired and by her school’s concert and marching band instructor. Kaylee played saxophone and piano for the band and served as a leader and teacher of other band members. She was active in volunteer activities at her school through the Beta organization, and yet was always able to maintain high grades.

Kaylee will begin her college years this fall at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, where she will begin pursuing a master’s degree in either social work or psychology, with a minor in general or special education. Taking this direction in her studies fits with career goals she is considering, including becoming a teacher of the visually impaired, a rehabilitation counselor, or a social worker with people with disabilities or veterans. We wish Kaylee all the best as she embarks on this new phase of her life, and we hope to see her become involved with GCB as well.

Jill King attended high school at Statesboro STEAM Academy, graduating in 2020. During her last two years of high school, she was also enrolled at Georgia Southern University, becoming a fulltime student there in 2021.

Jill has become visually impaired more recently and she deals with other disabilities as well, but she has found tremendous support from the disabled students’ organization on the Georgia Southern campus. She was one of its founders in 2021 and has served as a board member and as secretary for the organization. Her campus and community experience has also included serving as a peer mentor for youth with developmental disabilities, as a writing tutor, and as a research assistant in a psychology lab. Jill has also taken on the volunteer position as public relations director for the Madeline Ryan Smith campaign for the Georgia House of Representatives.

Jill anticipates finishing her degree in 2023 in psychology, with a minor in public health. She is certain of wanting to work in the mental health field in some capacity as a therapist. The therapy sessions she went through herself to come to terms with her disabilities has led her to imagine working with young disabled adults to guide them through the process of understanding and thriving with their disabilities. We also wish Jill all the best as she completes her degree and considers career possibilities. We hope as well to see Jill become more involved with GCB.

GCB Updates from Jill King and Kaylee Caraway GCB Scholarship Recipients

Update from Jill King

Hello GCB! I am Jill King, and I am legally blind. Currently there is not a clear diagnosis or “culprit,” because although I have the LHON 14484 gene I have not lost my vision in a way that lines up with LHON. I am a bit medically complicated, including ways other than my vision. I am a junior psychology major at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, GA. It is during my time at GSU that I have lost most of my peripheral vision. Although my medical pathology has been complicated, I have also been incredibly lucky.

Alongside two other disabled students (one being GCB 2019 scholarship recipient Madeline Ryan Smith), I started a disability advocacy group at GSU called the Students with Disabilities Advocacy Group (SDAG). Finding this community among local disabled students has been what has guided me as my vision loss progressed. I have been incredibly grateful for that community and am glad to find more camaraderie through Georgia Council of the Blind. I will continue my education in Psychology by pursuing a Doctorate in Counseling or Clinical Psychology which would lead me to become a licensed Psychologist. I plan to focus my therapy practice with the disabled community and continue to advocate as I do now. Becoming blind has made me focus on my goals and strengths. It has centered me while it has also thrown me a bit off balance. I spend most of my time studying, snuggling my cat Fig, or spending time with the close friends I have found in the disabled community. I would like to thank GCB again for this scholarship, it will aid me in continuing my education.

If you have any more questions for Jill King, please contact her at 912-425-1388, or via email jk17227@georgiasouthern.edu.

Update from Kaylee Caraway

My name is Kaylee Caraway. I have recently graduated from high school where I served as a member of our Beta Club, as well as a member of our marching and concert band leadership team as a section leader. As an upcoming college first-year student, I plan to attend the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga as a social work major with hopes to further integrate myself into the blind/visually impaired community in and outside of my studies. I was diagnosed with Stargardt's Disease at 11 years old--quite an early age to be told your vision is slowly deteriorating and its cause is "incurable". Despite this, I have never let my lack of vision hold me back from my passions, goals, and dreams--if anything, using it as a catalyst for my personal growth and success. My goal is to help further this message for others like me and to help them realize that despite being labeled as "disabled", there is nothing nor anyone that can truly hinder their abilities to succeed. Because of this, I am grateful to have been awarded the Al and Cora Camp Memorial Scholarship. To have the support of the GCB is something I am deeply honored to have.

If you have any more questions for Kaylee Caraway, please contact her at 706-518-3618 Email address: knc03162004@gmail.com

What a Calling Tree Could Mean to GCB

By Mike Hall

In the last GCB Digest, Cecily Laney Nipper and I discussed the idea of a calling tree where individual volunteers would call individual members who either do not have email or are not comfortable with technology. The need to reach out to this group of members was highlighted in GCB and nationally with ACB during the pandemic when chapters were not meeting in person due to health concerns with the virus. Some folks could not handle the Zoom platform. Others did not have unlimited long-distance calling, which prevented them from dialing into the conference calls where chapters were meeting virtually. Even though most of us are back to in-person meetings, some folks may not be attending for reasons ranging from lingering health concerns to transportation. Even members who do attend may miss some of our activities by not getting the emails that are sent out. A calling tree could help to engage these members.

One thing that a calling tree could do is to allow members to share experiences and ideas with each other. When I first got involved with GCB, we did not have the internet, email or computers. Nobody had a cell phone. When it came time for a chapter meeting, I would often call each member to remind them of the meeting and to mention any program or speaker we were expecting. During many of those calls, I would learn what that member was doing or something about his life. One gentleman was a truck driver before he lost his sight. He would talk to me about the places he drove and how some Georgia rivers run throughout the state. Another lady would tell me stories of situations she was dealing with as a person who lost her sight. I could identify with One predicament. When you go into a public restroom by yourself, where do you find the toilet paper?! As you can see, our calling tree provides opportunities for sharing.

Another way that a calling tree can be useful is with encouragement. I have found that you can encourage folks by simply listening. By paying attention to the other person, we are showing that that individual is important. When you think about your life, who has encouraged you? Was it a teacher, coach or a good friend? We can offer that same kind of encouragement over the phone. If you are talking to a person who is struggling with reading print, you may suggest a magnifying device you have used. Another person may want to read the newspaper. You may want to suggest the NFB Newsline. If someone gives you an idea of how to do something better, it is an opportunity for you to thank them for the idea. Everybody needs a little encouragement from time to time.

Finally, a calling tree can facilitate communication. Many ham radio operators are part of a national organization called the American Radio Relay League or ARRL. The organization helps to bring ham radio operators together by providing education and events to help involve hams in the hobby. For many years, I questioned where the word relay came from in the organization's name. As it turns out, ARRL was formed back in 1914. At that time, radios were only reaching about 50 miles. Telephones were expensive and sometimes unreliable. To increase the range of communications, stations were set up to relay messages. One station would send a message to a station about 50 miles away. That station would relay that message another 50 miles. A big deal was made about the first message to be relayed from California to New York. Our calling tree can relay important messages about GCB happenings. For example, I just heard that a Georgia state committee is pushing to have only paper ballots to be used in the November election. While that may help folks who do not trust the new machines, it also means that people who are visually impaired will not be able to vote independently. I would not have known about this activity along with suggestions for sharing our concerns had I not read the email. This kind of information could be shared through the calling tree. Now I admit it would be a challenge to share all the information, but we could at least get out the word.

A side benefit of a calling tree is that it could help GCB keep members. I heard of a member of a Lions Club who went into the hospital. After he was released, he resigned from the club. When he was asked about his resignation, he said that nobody from the Lions Club called while he was in the hospital. Not a single member of the Lions Club checked on him. He felt that he was not important to the club. One phone call from a concerned member could have made a difference. I know how much it means to me when somebody thanks me for something I have done. It encourages me when I hear that folks are glad that I came on a community call. I also know how easy it is to get busy and fail to call someone I haven't heard from in a while. As an organization, we want to keep growing with new members and fresh ideas, but we don't want to lose the people we already have.

I look forward to getting together with the public relations committee to discuss this idea of a calling tree as well as other things we are doing to keep in touch as members of the Georgia Council of the Blind. In the meantime, I would welcome any of your thoughts and suggestions. Call me at either 678 936-3911 or 770 535-2119. Email me at n4hgo1@gmail.com.

GCB Awards Criteria and Committee Members:

Awards Committee Chair: Judy Presley PO Box 231, Helen GA 30545, Home Phone #: 706-878-2962, cell Phone #: 706-400-2185, Email: Hoyal@windstream.net

The June Willis Guiding Eyes Award: The recipient must be a sighted GCB member who is known to GCB members through attendance at GCB state activities, and through his/her willing assistance and service to the blind and visually impaired.

June Willis Guiding Eyes

Chair: Keith Morris 3359 White Oak Road, Thomson GA 30824, Home Phone#: 706-595-1465 cell Phone #: 706-799-5225, email: Keithmorris53@icloudcom

Teresa Brenner 912-247-0446 tabrenner49@gmail.com

Mike Hall 678-936-3911, N4hgo1@gmail.com

GCB Awards Criteria

The Gerald Pye Community Service Award: The recipient must be an active legally blind member of GCB in good standing. He or she must have demonstrated superior service to his or her community in several ways that exemplify the work of Gerald Pye. The candidate must be nominated in writing by a GCB member who knows firsthand of the candidate's community services. Examples of this service must be included in the written recommendation.

Gerald Pye Community Service Award

Chair: Cecily Laney Nipper 41 Butler Bridge Road, Covington GA 30016, Phone #: 470-218-7885, Email: roses828@comcast.net

Teresa Brenner 912-247-0446, Tabrenner49@gmail.com

Kathy Morris 706-466-2253, mkumorris@yahoo.com

Rhoda Walker Award: The recipient can be a blind or sighted individual. Services rendered must be of non-paying status. Services may be any endeavor in the field of teaching, service, and betterment of life for the blind. The recipient must provide public awareness through speaking, seminars, and/or demonstration. There must be involvement of the educational field/teaching braille. The recipient must push any innovation involving blindness or blind people.

Rhoda Walker Award

Chair: Hoyal Presley PO Box 231, Helen GA 30545, Phone #: 706-878-6041, email: hoyalpresley@gmail.com

Jeremy Adams 706-200-2087, Adamsj154@gmail.com

Phil Jones 770-713-3306, Brilman1952@gmail.com

The Walter R. McDonald Award: The recipient is an outstanding visually impaired individual who has, through his/her leadership and service, contributed significantly to the betterment of the blind and visually impaired community, and who has demonstrated by deeds and achievements his/her dedication to the principles incident to blindness espoused and practiced by the late Walter R. McDonald. The recipient may or may not be a member of the GCB.

Walter R McDonald

Chair: Deborah Lovell 3215 Lake Forest Drive, Augusta GA 30909, Phone #: 706-667-8035, email: Lovelld2000@gmail.com

Amanda Wilson 770-547-4700, moonrocks@bellsouth.net

Danielle McIntyre 678-343-7550, dgrenevitch@me.com

The nominations shall include the name of the candidate, plus the reason the candidate deserves the award. Nominations for all awards shall be submitted to the respective award committee chairperson in writing (including email) no later than October 15, of this year.

GCB Al and Cora Camp Memorial Scholarship

The Georgia Council of the Blind (GCB) will award several scholarships of up to one thousand dollars to students who are legally blind, or to sighted students who are financially dependent on legally blind parent(s). Applicants must be accepted in one of the following levels of post-secondary education: (a) Vocational/technical school; (b) College or University; (c) Master’s or Doctoral program at an accredited university. The deadline for receipt of the Al and Cora Camp Memorial scholarship information is March 15, of this year. Scholarship applications may be obtained from Chair, Marj Schneider, at the address above, or via the Web Site: Click Here to Visit the [GCB Web Site](http://georgiacounciloftheblind.org/)

Al and Cora Camp Memorial Scholarship Awards:

Chair: Marj Schneider 212 Oxford Drive, Savannah GA 31405, Phone #: 912-257-9750, email: marjschneider@bellsouth.net

Deborah Lovell 706-667-8035, lovell.d2000@gmail.com

Granger Ricks 770-898-9036, granger.ricks1@gmail.com

Tom Ridgway 478-474-3577, tom.ridgeway1944@att.net

Jamaica Miller 706-316-9766, jamaicamiller55@gmail.com

Mary Woodyard 770-639-7092, marywoodyard@comcast.net

Madeline Ryan Smith:

Running for Georgia House of Representatives

Excerpts from an interview by Marj Schneider, April 28, 2022

In 2019 Madeline Ryan smith was one of four recipients of the GCB Al and Cora Camp Memorial Scholarship. She was then a junior at Georgia Southern University, majoring in psychology, graduating in the fall of 2020. She stayed at Georgia Southern and began a master’s of arts in social sciences program, focusing on sociology. Madeline’s studies have included disability issues, leading to research papers she presented on campus and also to the founding in 2021 of a students with disabilities advocacy group at Georgia Southern. She served as the first president for the organization. Now, not only has she just graduated with that master’s degree, but she is running in District 158 for a seat in the House of Representatives of the Georgia General Assembly.

Marj: Why have you chosen to run for office, rather than working in advocacy organizations on issues that are important to you?

Madeline: “I think that I am a very strong leader and I think we have had a lack of politicians in our state and in our country that actually are there for the reasons they’re supposed to be there. I think a lot of politicians forget that they are not paid for an opinion; they are paid to listen to other people’s opinions and vote the way the people tell them to vote. We see politicians with personal agendas or regurgitating their personal opinions and trying to get everybody to think the way that they think. It’s like, that’s not why you’re here. I know with all of my schooling in social science, and I have a bachelor’s in psychology, I’ve seen the ugly sides of politics, but I also understand, when you take a step back and look at politics from a third perspective, you really have to be cut out for that job and I think a lot of people are not that are in office right now. They maybe do not have the same moral compass and the same ethics, the same drive, the same interpersonal intelligence. Knowing how to talk to people and really understanding other people’s perspectives, I think has been very lost. I’m good at that, so if people want me to represent them, I think that I would be a good candidate to do that and I know that I would do it the right way.”

Marj: Why are you running for a House seat, as opposed to a school board position or some other political office in your community?

Madeline: “This area of the state where I live is a very rural area, but in the City of Statesboro our mayor is very progressive. He’s our first African American mayor and I got really involved in his campaign when he got reelected. That blossomed for me into an interest in the playing field of state politics through the Young Democrats of Georgia and all the different people I met through politics that were state representatives. Through research I realized that in my area specifically, our state legislator does not promote progress. There’s a lot of stagnancy in this area and that really bothered me. I think being in the state legislature, where you are voting on state laws, not only do you have the capability of giving a voice to your own space, the four counties that you’re representing, this rural area of Georgia, but you also are able to be a voice in the state legislature where you can put bills on the floor, you can vote with your opinion, and that is giving your constituents a voice. You might not be making as much concrete difference in daily lives, but you do have that voice at the state level to be making laws that will then affect people’s lives at a very drastic rate later. Examples are things like disability policy, funding for education, women’s rights, LGBTQ legislation. Those are all things that state legislators vote on, so the more we can have people from rural towns that are progressive, because progressive politics works for rural towns, the better off we will be. Especially in Georgia and especially in this area of Georgia, we’ve had the same representative, through redistricting, since 2005 and it’s just time for a change. I’m the only Democrat running and I’m running against an incumbent Republican. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with being Republican at all, but I think after his 35 years as a state representative, it’s time to give someone else a chance.”

Marj: Clearly, political activities are a passion for you, but are you familiar with the details of the day-to-day work of the legislature?

Madeline: “Just from a civics standpoint, what I loved about studying social science and psychology was that I did take specific classes in political science, state and federal government, how K-12 politics in education work. I’ve definitely seen the inner workings of political science in a very interdisciplinary way, which I think has helped me a lot. I’ve thought that me going into office with the background I have, in the general sense of social science, political science, it would give me a really good moderate lens to be able to see the world. Having that schooling and having my personal life as a human, how I was raised, has given me the opportunity to be able to see both perspectives and understand why someone might think the way they do or why someone has an opinion. It makes me better for talking to people who are ‘from the other side,’ because I have very close family who are more conservative and have stronger religious beliefs than I do, but those are some of my favorite people on the planet. It just comes down to, if you can put yourself in the other person’s shoes, that’s all that really counts.”

Marj: District 158, where you are running for office, encompasses parts of four counties: Bulloch, Candler, Emanuel and Treutlen. Outside of Statesboro, is the district entirely rural or are there other cities of any size?

Madeline: “District 158 is mostly agricultural with only a few other industries represented on a wide scale. Most of us live at or near the poverty line. Many of us do not have access to Internet. I think only 70% of our district has broadband. Unfortunately, 90% of our K-12 students live at or below the poverty line. When I mentioned stagnancy earlier, that’s what I mean. There’s no opportunity here and that hasn’t changed.”

Marj: How are you connecting with people in your district?

Madeline: “I am a very big believer in using your community, so I have been trying to be everywhere I can possibly be, every event that comes up. Everything that I’m invited to, I show up to. I am very good at asking questions and listening to other people’s answers. I held a meet and greet a few months ago, and the majority of my meet and greet was other people talking and me listening. That’s how I think it should be. I think people find value in being listened to. Everybody just wants to be listened to. Even if I can’t solve your problem right here, I will at least try to find someone who can or do my best to figure out an answer for you. I try to be available, listen, be responsive. If someone sends you a message, answer it, and just being part of the community. I really wanted to run my campaign as someone who is a community member here that’s stepping up to the plate to represent us all. I don’t want to be famous, I don’t want to be a well-known politician, I don’t want to do any of that. I just want to make sure that we all have what we need to be successful and that’s it.”

Marj: Do you have a sense of momentum building, especially toward the primary?

Madeline: “What has really surprised me is that students have stepped up to the plate. College students are notorious for not voting, especially here. Most of us usually don’t change our voter addresses, but we have had a huge increase of students who are left-leaning who have gotten involved in politics in the past four years. I think Donald Trump’s becoming president triggered a little of that in my generation, but we’ve just become a much more political university recently. A lot of people assume that Georgia Southern is really Republican; it is not. It’s a very liberal campus. I’ve gotten a lot of support from college students and I’ve gotten a lot of support from closeted Democrats in the rural South. I’ve gotten a lot of support from community members in Statesboro. All of our funding so far has come from individual donors who live in this district, so that has been cool to see happen. We just reached our $1000 mark. As a first-time candidate, and I only have a team of eight people, and my entire campaign team is college students, that’s not even that much money. Compared to other campaigns, that’s almost no money. However, this is a grassroots effort, and even the smallest amount of momentum can turn into large change.”

Marj: I assume that outside of the college campus, in talking with members of the broader district community, that you encounter people who bring forward more what might be called conservative views or libertarian views, not left-leaning views. I hate all these labels because they box us in. I imagine you’re encountering different views from what you hear from your fellow college students.

Madeline: “Yes. To your point, labels are awful; I totally agree. I was raised in a religiously and politically split household, so labels have never been something that we do. I didn’t really know the differences between Democrats and Republicans until I became a high school student. That was something we didn’t fight about when I was growing up; there was no reason to. I think that we forget, especially now that technology is a thing, we forget the human behind the keyboard most of the time. I think people say things online that they would never say to people in person and I think that’s an issue. Cancel culture, obviously, and pointing fingers at other people and not listening, screaming at other people and trying to interject your opinion. ‘I’m right. You should think this way.’ But as soon as somebody does that to you, you completely are unwilling to listen. You can’t say, ‘I think this way, I’m going to be this, these are my political ideas, and I support freedom and want all these rights,’ and then the second someone doesn’t agree with you, they’re evil. I think it’s possible to be so open-minded and so left, that you end up being closed-minded and not accepting of other people.

The best thing that we can do is put people in leadership positions that aren’t like that, that don’t label everybody and are there for all. If we put people who are good leaders in leadership positions and everybody will lead by example, maybe one day we can get to a point where not everything is left and right.

Marj: A challenge for you, then, is to be talking with these rural folk and convince them that you are listening, that you will do whatever you can on their behalf, even if you may seem to them somebody who has very different political views.

Madeline: “That’s one thing that I’ve always tried to communicate very clearly in my campaign is that I’m a very moderate person. I have views that liberals would not agree with or like, and I have views that Republicans and conservatives would not agree with or like. I truly believe that there’s moderation in everything and compromising is the best way to do things. It’s a representative’s job to vote and represent the people, the way the people want to be represented, not the way they think they should be. I can understand when people say, ‘I don’t trust politicians,’ because not all politicians vote the way that they’re told by the people that they represent. I know that I would do that. I trust myself enough to be in the capitol and represent the people that live around me.

I think it’s valuable to also remember that no matter who I am or what my personal beliefs are, I have to remember that I represent a group of people that might not have the same culture and values that I do, and I might not agree with everything that this district wants, but it’s not my job to agree with it. It’s my job to make sure that the people have what they need to be successful. If that’s a slightly more conservative environment, then so be it, but at least I’m doing what I can to make sure the people who live in this area are happy and healthy people.”

Marj: What has been the response to you? You are young, you are a woman and you are clearly visually impaired because you have a guide dog with you. Are people taking you seriously, and I mean people outside of the college campus?

Madeline: “I think so, yes. It’s funny that you asked that, because I have gotten really involved with the Bulloch county Democratic party down here. The local community, I’ve gotten involved a lot there and I’ve had a lot of help trying to get the word out.

We had this candidates' forum about two weeks ago here, and all the candidates who are running for office came. We were not expecting to see any of these incumbent Republican district representatives here. The incumbent who I’m running against showed up to the forum that I was at, because I legitimately think he’s kind of afraid of losing his seat. My competition is taking me seriously, which is something I did not expect. The last person who ran against him was also a white woman and she only got a third of the vote.

I try not to pay attention to people when they talk about me. It’s not my business what people think of me. I have yet to hear anything negative. I’m not sure if it’s because it doesn’t exist or because I’m just not hearing it, but it seems the competition is taking me seriously and I’ve only heard positive things. I think people here in this area are just ready for some change, especially with covid. People are seriously struggling down here. A lot of people are out of work; a lot of people are living paycheck to paycheck. Our kids are really behind in school. Something has got to give down here and our current representation is not doing it for us.”

Marj: I have to ask this. Is your dog helpful in campaigning?

Madeline: “Oh, of course; he’s the highlight. The only reason people come at all is for the dog. Mercury has been the mascot, and he’s been doing so well. He’s been a great tool for education about disabilities, education about working dogs in general. One thing that he does trigger more, that is interesting and that I didn’t anticipate, is that people are more interested in my campaign because I’m visually impaired. It makes sense because I’m a Democrat, but if I was a Republican it maybe would be a little different. It’s almost disappointing that when people find out that I’m blind, that’s the most interesting thing about me. It’s not that I’d be a good leader or that you really like my platform; it’s that I’m blind and that’s interesting. That’s fine, if that’s how people learn about me, but I would rather be the candidate who’s just really good at the job and not the candidate who’s blind.”

Marj: But if it’s not a negative, that people are thinking, oh, she could never do the job… You’re unproven to them, so they have to have something to attract them. The dog is going to be the first thing, and that you’re visually impaired is second. That you’re young and a woman fall behind those other things.

Madeline: “Thinking about it that way, it’s probably good that people are focusing on the fact that I’m visually impaired and not the fact that I’m 25. I’d rather be answering questions about me being blind than me being 25 years old. ‘Why are you doing this?’ I think age could end up hurting me. I’m just glad that I prioritized my education before anything else. I am 25, but I also do have a master’s degree. I might be young, but I do have a pretty big brain.”

Marj: Any last thoughts you would want to share about what this journey is like for you?

Madeline: “It has been eye-opening to see, when there’s a community like Statesboro in this rural area and there is this opportunity for change, so many people come together to make that spark happen. It’s been really cool to get to know the community, but also to be a part of the community when they all come together. It’s that sense of family, which is what drew me to Statesboro as a small town, because I grew up in the city, so I’m a city girl. But that’s why I love Statesboro is that it’s that small town, community feeling, where you’re always going to see people in the grocery store that you know. It’s made me appreciate rural towns and made me appreciate the southern culture behind a lot of things down here. I’m glad I’m a part of it.”

To learn more about Madeline’s campaign for a seat in the Georgia House of Representatives in District 158, visit the campaign’s webpage:

[Home | Madeline Ryan Smith for Georgia House District 158](https://www.madelineryansmithforgeorgia.com/)

The End