



Envision Dallas Outreach Manager Blake Lindsay also serves as an advocate for people who are blind at both the local and federal levels.

“For me, being blind is a gift,” says Lindsay who is also a voice artist, motivational speaker, and author.

# COMMUNITY SERVICE

Employees at NIB associated agencies serve their communities in ways big and small.

BY SHARON HARRIGAN

Employees at NIB associated nonprofit agencies take great pride in the work they do, particularly on behalf of the military and veterans. But their pride – and interests – don’t stop when the workday ends. For many employees, living a full life outside the workplace means making meaningful contributions to their communities in some unique and surprising ways.

## ‘To Me, Being Blind Is a Gift’

Blind since infancy, Blake Lindsay, outreach manager at Envision Dallas, has never believed being blind is a disability. A successful radio personality for 22 years, Lindsay spent time in the banking industry and is a

motivational speaker, author, and voice artist. In 2009, he joined Envision Dallas as manager of communications.

A graduate of the first class of NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment program, Lindsay works with NIB’s public policy team in educating national, state, and local officials about the efforts of NIB and its associated agencies to increase employment opportunities for people who are blind. As part of his advocacy work, he frequently speaks at Rotary International, Kiwanis, and Lions clubs in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, as well as at schools, to raise awareness about Envision Dallas’ services and the capabilities of people who are blind.

“Over the past 12 years, I have spoken to a lot of Lions Clubs about White Cane Day, with a focus on making it a celebration about not just canes, but all the technical innovations that have empowered people who are blind to live independent lives,” says Lindsay. “I had been trying for years to speak at the Oak Cliff Lions Club here in Dallas, but they were a larger club and usually got celebrities to speak. I must have finally worn them down because they let me visit and talk with them about White Cane Day. Then they asked me to come back and speak again,” he recalls.

“I immediately loved the group and felt very at home there,” says Lindsay, who joined the Oak Cliff Lions Club about eight years ago. The club wasted no time putting him to work. “They expected me to roll up my sleeves and dive in. I really appreciated that,” says Lindsay. Over the years, he has volunteered as a greeter at the club’s low vision clinic, helped run the eyeglass recycling program, and more recently, participated in the club’s pop-up COVID-19 vaccination clinics.

This year, Lindsay is the club’s first vice president. “The club has about 100 members, so that makes it one of the larger clubs in the area,” says Lindsay. “We do a lot of good work, and I’m proud of the difference we are making in our community.”

## Firefighter and EMT

James Martino, e-commerce sales and business development associate for the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Utica, New York, was born without irises, the part of the eye that regulates the amount of light that enters the eye by opening and closing the pupil. Having low vision is all he has ever known, but he says he’s always thought of it as a challenge, not a disability.

“My mother is totally blind, but other family members are sighted,” says Martino. “I feel like I had the best of both worlds. I learned from both my family members with vision and from my mom.”

Martino grew up on a farm, and from an early age was taught how to do things just as a fully sighted person would. He did chores, rode a bike, and dreamed of being a firefighter like his uncle. As he grew older, that dream became a life goal.

When he applied to become a volunteer firefighter, Martino recalls, he was asked many questions by the board of directors, who initially doubted his ability to do the job because of his eyesight. “They asked me how I would get to the calls. I said to leave that up to me.” When one of the board members said that in an actual fire, even sighted firefighters have difficulty seeing because the smoke is so thick, Martino replied “that’s where I have an advantage, I guess, because I’m used to doing things by feel.”

He was approved to be a volunteer firefighter the following month, in February 1988. Although he has since moved out of the district and become an honorary firefighter, Martino

served his community for 30 years. In addition to being a volunteer firefighter, he was also a Level 3 EMT for 30 years.

As a volunteer firefighter, Martino says, he never knew how often he would be called to respond, but says volunteers were expected to meet 20% of the calls or functions each year, and his department responded to between 360-440 calls a year.

And then there were the functions. Martino attended countless functions over the years – fundraisers like chicken barbeque dinners, and the annual Christmas party for the children in the community, where Martino often starred as Santa.

Some days were busier than others, says Martino. “My late wife and I lived near the firehouse,” recalls Martino. “One day, she was giving me a haircut. Or at least trying to. I sat down and was called to respond. We had nine calls that day, and it took four attempts to finish that haircut.”

“The job takes a lot of time and dedication,” says Martino. “I could not have done it without the support of my family.”



**▲** James Martino, e-commerce sales and business development associate for the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Utica, New York served 30 years as a volunteer firefighter. When questioned about how he would handle situations where the smoke was too thick to see Martino, who was born without irises, told interviewers, “that’s where I have an advantage.”

## COVER STORY

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▲ When she's not working as a line manager at The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., in Seattle, Carla Abbott is a FEMA-certified member of the City of Redmond, Washington, community emergency response team.

### Taekwondo Grand Master and Community Emergency Response Team Member

Carla Abbott, a line manager at The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., in Seattle, is also a taekwondo grand master 8th degree black belt (9th degree is the highest level that can be achieved). In addition to being one of the few women in the country to have earned the level, Abbott is a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) certified member of the City of Redmond, Washington, community emergency response team (CERT).

Abbott started learning taekwondo 40 years ago, when she was working as a janitor at a Salvation Army where a class was being held that piqued her interest. "Actually, I originally wanted to be a female wrestler," says Abbott. She's glad, though, that she went with taekwondo instead.

"It completely changed my outlook of the world. Being visually impaired, I wanted to prove to everyone that I could do everything all by myself. I've always been visually impaired, but it was getting worse, and I wasn't handling it very well. taekwondo taught me that it's OK to ask for help," says Abbott.

Practicing taekwondo, she says, taught her how to trust others, adapt, and navigate the world. The martial art's philosophical underpinnings, Abbott says, taught her self-confidence, how to regulate emotions, and how to avoid conflict.

Without her taekwondo experience, says Abbott, she would never have believed she could become a FEMA-certified CERT member. The City of Redmond CERT training consists of 24 hours of courses over a series of eight weeks that teaches community members basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations.

## IFB Solutions Employees Volunteer at Second Harvest Food Bank, Hold Blood Drives

At IFB Solutions in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, employees regularly volunteer at Second Harvest Food Bank, says Anastasia Powell, corporate culture and internal communications manager.

"The idea came from an employee-driven outreach committee," recalls Powell. Every other month, up to five employees and a member of the committee volunteer at Second Harvest, putting together boxes, nonperishable meals, and loading pallets on trucks. IFB Solutions gives employees up to eight hours a year to perform volunteer work, so the employees go to Second Harvest during the workday. "The shifts are usually two hours long," notes Powell.

At the end of the shift, volunteers are treated to a meal. "Second Harvest Food Bank also houses the Providence Culinary Training program," explains Powell. The 13-week program helps individuals who have experienced job loss, incarceration, or substance abuse learn culinary skills to help them rejoin society. "Needless to say, the meals are delicious," says Powell.



▲ Youth program coordinator Kim Flanagan and line team lead Brooke Brown are just two of the IFB Solutions employees who volunteer at the Second Harvest Food Bank in Winston-Salem, North Carolina each month.

"We learned how to put out fires, how to move people out of buildings on chairs, how to examine buildings for safety, and how to mark buildings as searched. It was a really good program," says Abbott.

The CERT program holds an expo every summer, where team members participate in various scenarios. Abbott says she participates in the scenarios to help others understand how to address the needs of a person who is blind during a disaster. "For example, there's an earthquake, and glass is shattered everywhere around me, my shoes are across the room, and I can't navigate to get out. It helps team members understand what they need to do to help me get out safely."

Abbott has also spoken in front of city officials to help them understand the needs of people who are blind who may need to take shelter in the event of an emergency. "For example, how will a person who is blind get to the shelter? How will they find their cots? Shelter volunteers will need to escort them to their cots and give them landmarks so they can find them again. Shelters should have extra food on hand to feed guide dogs, that sort of thing," explains Abbott.

It's rewarding work, says Abbott. "Taekwondo taught me that it's OK to ask for help. Now, I can teach others the questions to ask so that they can help people in need more effectively."

## Helping Victims of Domestic Violence

"I strongly believe in the sanctity of marriage," says Nelida Torres, a survivor of domestic violence. "But when your husband pushes your son down the subway stairs, breaking his arm, and doesn't even take him to the hospital that's across the street, I had to make a decision." For the sake of her safety and that of her son, Torres divorced her husband and moved with her son from New York City to Orlando, Florida.

Shortly after arriving in Orlando, she learned she had glaucoma and turned to Lighthouse Central Florida for help. "They were there for me. They taught me how to do everything," she says. "I miss and mourn my eyesight, but it doesn't limit me."

Torres began volunteering at the Lighthouse, eventually being hired to work part time. Today, she works full time in customer care. "The Lighthouse gave me freedom, independence, the will to live," she says. "I saw others like me doing things, and I knew I could do it too."

"I received so much. I knew that it was time to give back," says Torres; about five and a half years ago, she opened her home to women with and without children who were fleeing domestic violence.

"I ran an 'underground railroad' because many of them weren't safe," she says. The women found Torres through her church, and although she sheltered women without children, she especially liked sheltering women with children so the kids could see how her son not only survived his experience, but thrived.



▲ After escaping domestic abuse, Nelinda Torres and her son opened their homes to other women and children in need of a safe haven. She especially wanted the children to see how her son was not only surviving, but thriving.

The underground railroad ended because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but then a friend introduced Torres to Aspire Health Partners, a nonprofit behavioral healthcare organization. "Many of the people who come to Aspire have experienced domestic violence, substance abuse, or have survived human trafficking," she explains Torres. Her role is to sit and listen to their stories.

"They just want safety and to know that they are loved – they're often scared for their lives." In addition to counseling, Aspire helps people find jobs, build their resumes, find clothing suitable for interviews, and more.

Aspire also had to close its shelter because of the pandemic, but that hasn't stopped Torres, who, with support from Lighthouse employees, her community, and her church, has been filling up her garage with donations of food, clothes, crafts, and more. "The outpouring from everyone has been incredible. When my garage gets full, friends come with vans and help distribute the donations."

If that work weren't enough, Torres also volunteers at The Mustard Seed of Central Florida, a nonprofit whose mission is to help rebuild the lives of families and individuals who have suffered disaster or personal tragedy by providing household furnishings and clothing. Torres, who is fluent in English and Spanish, helps translate when needed. But she doesn't want to stop there. "I want to learn French, because a lot of families coming to The Mustard Seed lately are fleeing from Haiti."

"I want people – and especially my son – to know that they should never give up," says Torres. "There is always a silver lining of hope, faith, and persistence."

We aren't defined by our disabilities, our experiences. I choose to be the person I am. I choose to be a warrior, a comforter, someone who can share hope. You can too. Never give up." ■

*Sharon Horrigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.*