

Report of the Vice President/Program Coordinator

The following is, hopefully, a concise and accurate rendering of DBCA's summer activities for 2018, along with comments, suggestions, and feedback from other key players. We will begin, naturally, with the DBYAA program, which has for many years been the focus of DBCA's annual energies; we shall then proceed to non-DBYAA-related activities undertaken by DBCA members; the last step shall be an argument for reorientation, reprioritization, and some degree of reorganization to make ourselves more effective on behalf of our community.

Arising in large part from the LOGIC model and SWOT analysis work of last autumn, the major innovation of this year's DBYAA was the stipended position of program coordinator which it was Vice President Stern's great honour to test drive. The purposes of the position, as stated in the establishing document, is: "1) program participant recruitment and selection; (2) preparing participants virtually (using an online learning interface with relevant content, building mentor-mentee relationships, and ongoing individualized support); (3) logistics planning (travel, housing, communication, etc); (4) event scheduling (federal agency invitations, Capitol Hill visits, and forums and/or panel sessions with partner organizations);

and (5) post-program assessments and follow-up participant support and/or action planning. The overarching purpose of the position is to ensure that the mission of the Program itself is supported and fulfilled.” This is an enormous task, as you can see, and virtually impossible for one person alone. Let us begin, then, by extending heartfelt thanks to the team on the ground: Melissa Hays as our volunteer coordinator, Kat Peters as our logistics person, and Suzanne Ressa as our finance and all rescue person, as well as Jacob Hogan, who stepped into a role as daily schedule coordinator in addition to his other duties. Without their brain power, flexibility, patience, ingenuity, and experience, this week could not have

contributed to the DBYAA tradition of empowerment through experience and exposure. We are as well indebted to fellow DBCA members Divya Goel, Hunter McGowan, Jamie Taylor, and Amita Srinivasan, all of whom stepped up in incredible ways during this week, showing their caliber as mentors, leaders, and team players. Thank you all for your service.

I. Program synopsis

1. Personnel:

- Program Coordinator: George Stern
- *Volunteer coordinator: Melissa Hays*
- Logistic: Kat Peters (assisted by Josh Peters)
- Finance person and general support:

Suzanne Ressa

2. Mentees/new participants:

- Christian Gonzalez (CA),
- Quinn Burch (NY),
- Nathan Mathewson (PA),
- JeFei Reeves (WA),
- Jeremy Best (FL).

3. Mentors:

- Jamie Taylor (MN),
- Hunter McGowan (PA),
- Divya Goel (FL),
- Amita Srinivasan (TX).

4. Support staff (SSP's, interpreters):

- Everett Puckett, Donna Schneider, Josh Richards, Christie Youngblood, Rita

Aguilar, Maritza Herrera, Halley Johnson,
Abigail Schiefelbein, Eugene Penzien,
Jacob Hogan, Joey Phelan, Malcom Reed,
Danielle Montour.

*II. Concise Schedule of Program Events (With
alterations as they occurred)*

i. Monday 25 June:

- 9:00-10:30 AM Intro to structure and function of government, including lecture (30-45 mins), tactile representation of government structure, and Nontrivial Pursuits game
- 10:30-10:50 AM break
- 10:50-12:00 PM mentor roleplay presentations from Non-trivial Pursuits,

intro to message crafting

- 1:00-3:00 PM small group breakout for message crafting (1 hour) group presentations (1 hour)
- 3:30-5:00 PM intro to agencies (mentor presentations), Q&A pursuant to selecting an agency for the next day's storytelling exercise (altered for continued message crafting work).

ii. Tuesday 26 June:

- 9:00-10:30 AM agency selections and storytelling boot camp (altered to agency intro and selection)
- 10:50-12:00 PM agency-specific storytelling practice, small and large

- group roleplay, mock Q&A
- 1:30-3:00 PM Continued message-crafting practice
- 3:30-5:00 PM Continued practice.

iii. Wednesday 27 June:

- Participant presentations to the Department of Transportation (Yvette Rivera) and Federal Transit Administration (speak of your lived experiences with transit);
- Discussion with Liz Savage, attorney advisor for the U.S. Department of Justice's Disability Rights Section.
- 3:30-4:30 PM Meeting with Suzanne Singleton and Jackie Ellington of the

Federal Communications Commission,
Disability Rights Office

iv. Thursday 28 June:

- Emergency FCC comment generation/small-group Hill visit (Nathan, Hunter, and Quinn on the Hill).
- 5:00-7:00 PM: Roundtable on accessible networking with Gallaudet and invited guests.

v. Friday 29 June:

- 10:00 AM: Library of Congress Accessible Tour

NOTE: The All attendees depart Gallaudet University and return to their respective homes on

Saturday 30th of June.

Once we had all recovered somewhat from our week in D.C., the ground team of Suzanne, Kat, Melissa, Jacob, Hunter, and VP Stern met via phone for frank discussions on what did and did not work for our program this year. Organized by Suzanne, the feedback covers the areas of pre-programmatic, programmatic, and post-programmatic. Here are some pertinent conclusions:

- 1) Applications did not go out in a timely and effective manner, resulting in late candidatures and rushed, last-minute decisions, all of which put particular burdens on our communications

staff and finances.

- Cause: A combination of our website being in transition, de-centralised document storage, Program Coordinator misjudgments, and a disinterested or previously committed deafblind community.
- Recommendations: a rolling application process, an expanded and more detailed application (with requirements for video demonstration of communication styles), a centralized and accessible document storage site (currently Dropbox, possibly upgrading to Dropbox Professional), and maximizing networks to distribute the

application.

- 2) The lack of an established selection committee further confused an already defective process.
 - Recommendation: establish a permanent selection committee comprised of a mixture of DBCA members, the board, and select volunteer staff.
- 3) Travel, managed by Kat Peters, was both streamlined and cost-effective this year, thanks to the use of one airline (which may allow for future discounts).
- 4) Mentors were inadequately prepared by the program coordinator for their roles during the week, and essential groundwork for the

mentor-mentee pairing was not effectively laid beforehand.

- Cause: Uncertainty around attending mentees, fluctuating program schedule, program coordinator inexperience.
- Recommendations: routine mentor meetings, early pairing of mentors and mentees, developmental assignments for mentees.

5) Volunteer staffing, managed by Melissa Hays, was an area of particular success. The dedication of previous year's volunteers meant that recruiting was fairly easy, even with the uncertainty around the needs of new mentees. It was also effective to have volunteers come

in early, have a day to explore D.C., receive professional O&M training/exposure, and have a hard cutoff time for availability. The one area of concern is with new staff being unclear on the role of SSP's in not speaking or negotiating for the organization.

- 6) Effective planning, whether for partnership events like the roundtable, agency visits, or Hill visits, necessitate timely and year-round communication to build, maintain, and maximize relationships. Failure in this regard leads to confusion around roles in events, stress on our communication team, deterioration of important relationships, and missed opportunities for impact.

- Recommendation: The formation of a dedicated communications committee to work in conjunction with the membership and board to organize, prioritize, and manage organizational communications.

Additional updates

Even as much as DBCA's focus is bent towards the annual DBYAA summer experience, a significant part of our reputation stems from work done by members beyond the week in D.C. Earlier this year, member Hunter McGowan joined our longtime partner AFB in a collaborative effort around Cogswell-Macy, and VP Stern was honoured to be invited as a

plenary speaker for the Deafblind International Network of the Americas conference in Cape Cod. At the beginning of summer, VP Stern was honoured to participate in a now customary role as keynote for the National Family Association for DeafBlind's (NFADB's) family weekend, after which it was off to a collaboration with the Tennessee project to share DBCA's unique self and civic empowerment model at the Southeastern Teen Retreat in partnership with member Divya Goel.

Immediately following the week of DBYAA, VP Stern attended the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) convention as an observer for DBCA, sitting in on two meetings of the fledgling NFB

deafblind division, and generally taking note of how a much larger, wealthier, and older organization like the NFB interact with policymakers, stakeholders, and allies. The experience was at once humbling and reaffirming: humbling to see such a vast and engaged membership, to see policymakers, employers, and industry leaders coming to the community rather than the reverse, to glimpse the rigorous communication and professionalism that made all this possible; it was reaffirming of DBCA's ultimate mission to provide such a space of impact for the deafblind community, and too of our unique ability to do so. For even as NFB and now apparently the National Association of

the Deaf (NAD) open their arms to the deafblind, their embrace is still an uncomfortable one; in our conscientious commitment to the diversity that defines deafblindness, in our extraordinary network of qualified volunteers, and in the boundary-pushing vivaciousness of our members, DBCA uniquely suits itself to the full empowerment of the DB community in a way that neither of these organizations.

In review of this past season, however, there are several steps that must be taken in order to transform great potential into actuality.

Earlier this year, President Gebre sent out a thoughtful email to the membership titled "Thoughts on the Current Political Climate," from

which a key passage reads: “The recent budget deal makes me wonder if DBCA should change its approach to advocacy. We typically visit Washington to push for our priorities during DBYAA. We are not proactive in the sense that we do not actively seize opportunities as they arise and are often constrained by our limited resources to just react to developments in the national policy arena.” This was the start of a crucial discussion regarding DBCA’s degree of focus and investment in the annual DBYAA program that, in the light of the difficulties that arose this summer during Hill advocacy, was quite timely. DBYAA is unique as a program that provides deafblind leaders both access to policymakers and peer-to-peer

networking in an appropriately supported and supportive space. We have sought, through DBYAA, to accord emerging deafblind leaders the same opportunities as their hearing-sighted peers find through various high school and college programs, as the blind find through the NFB's Jernigan Institute and American Council of the Blind's (ACB's) Washington Seminar. When done right, this week is life-changing, impactful, exhausting, illuminating, and satisfying. When done wrong, or done not as well as it could have been, this week is a potentially devastating waste of funds, time, energy, and other resources. This is a great many eggs to put in one basket, not to mention a great deal of pressure to put on our

volunteers, mentors, and coordinators. And so the notion of a biennial rather than annual DBYAA program has been emerging. The idea is that this will accord the time for detailed planning and meticulous material development that such a program deserves, while freeing up resources and energy for a more dynamic model of advocacy: a model that envisions DBCA members in working groups or mentor-mentee teams responding to federal or state legislative initiatives in realtime, submitting amici curiae or public comments, meeting with candidates for political office, attending technology or employment conferences, partnering with federal agencies, developing trainings for public venues, working with DB

projects to teach empowerment, and so much more. This model would promote engagement, provide a continuous honing of skills, help us build relationships, all of which could be brought back together in a powerful moment of sharing, teaching and induction during the biennial DBYAA meeting. We submit this to the board's consideration, along with the question of expanding or removing our age restriction for deafblind participants.