

Find Your Light: A Performing Artist With Vision Loss Talks About Her Life in Showbiz

Carmen Apelgren is a lifelong performer and teacher who, as she puts it, “happens to be visually



impaired.” She is a ‘quadruple threat’ in the Braille community: donor, retiree, student, volunteer. She spoke with SCENE about

her wide-ranging experience as a performer and an advocate for visually impaired people.

You began performing at an early age and you were diagnosed with retinas pigmentosa (RP) at about the same time. How did it affect your career?

I wanted to be a star since I was three years old. I was singing solos at church at four years old. In high school, I performed at the pep rallies. In college at Michigan State, I performed in all the plays. I never thought about being visually impaired since I was a high partial, which means my vision was about ten percent that of a sighted person. I could get around and pass as sighted until my forties. But when show producers in New York found out I was visually impaired, I never got the job. So, I started my own cabaret act.
(cont. on page 3)

Ask the Experts: Lynn Dubinsky on Artistic Enrichment

Lynn is the Regional Director of Education Programs at Braille Institute in charge of educational programming, including the arts and music enrichment classes.



Tell us about arts enrichment at Braille Institute.

We offer a variety of art, music and writing classes. So many people who come to us are adjusting not only to vision loss, but to all kinds of loss. Creative thinking stimulates problem solving and it’s a way to process emotions. The sensory skills developed in our classes help people move through some of those losses.



Special Issue: Get Creative in 2022!

Do creative skills transfer into other areas of personal development, such as independent daily living?

Art classes promote skill acquisition such as tactile and spatial awareness, like being in a ceramics class where you’re feeling the weight of the clay. That feeling of the clay can transfer to cooking and handling food in the kitchen. Appreciation of aesthetics and beauty in the world do not go away just because you’ve lost your sight or never had it.

How do you see the creative arts at Braille Institute evolving over the next few years?

First, the quality of our instructors is so impressive as well their ability to evolve their teaching style for this audience. They really understand the context and importance of the arts, seeing them for all their vitality and richness. Incorporating more technology is part of our future, too. Musicians recording their music, broadcasters producing their own podcasts, artists using iPads for drawing. Sharing our work with the community is on the horizon, too.

Putting It Together – Braille Institute’s Instructors Share Their Inspiration

Katherin Boyce

Educational Programs Instructor



My students inspire mindful habits, taking risks, laughing, crying and growing daily where there are no boundaries in sight. Together, we learn unfamiliar skills and strengthen unity.

A good teacher has a love of teaching.
A great teacher has a love of learning.

– Vikrant Parsai

Simone Montemurno, Creative Arts Instructor



My students have inspired me with their art, not to mention their innovation. I didn’t know everything about some materials I now teach when I came to Braille Institute; a student taught me

how to weave my first basket.

Erin Schalk, Art Instructor



My students have encouraged me to incorporate more sound into my work – everything from sound art to videos with detailed voiceovers. Braille Institute art students continually

challenge me to think deeply about how to make my artwork, as well as how to make it more accessible.

Scarlett Brais, Children’s Choir Director



Working with the youth choir students for the past seven years has made me a better teacher and musician. Their excitement and passion are a constant motivator and have inspired me to think “outside of the box.”

Noah Haytin, Creative Arts Instructor



Our students continue to inspire me with their resilience and enduring spirit. Many did not have email or a personal computer. They have pushed themselves to become far more tech

savvy than they were before.

Fay Roberts, Music Instructor



When my students are striving to grasp new concepts in our music study, their persistent and consistent practice inspires me to be consistent in my practice, too.

Start your creative journey with Braille Institute and sign-up for a class or workshop. Please call us at 800-272-4553 and we’ll help you get started!



Find Your Light (cont. from page 1)

Now at 70, I’m almost completely blind. Losing your sight is like losing a best friend. But you must find a way to keep going.

How has your creative career helped you to transcend difficulties in your life?

I’ll give you an example. When September 11 happened, I wrote a song called “Ashes in the Wind.” I use my creativity as an outlet for what’s going on in the world. It just comes out, from the gut. That’s how I deal with difficulties.

In your one-person cabaret show on YouTube, you talk about auditioning in New York and not getting the part. How did you overcome rejection there and find your own way?

I just kept moving ahead. In New York, I sang in piano bars. I would meet celebrities like Tennessee Williams who encouraged me. This was 1973, near the end of his life. I would sing songs he liked, and he’d stand beside me and hold my hand. Then I worked in Japan and Haiti. Then I lived in Los Angeles, and that’s when I volunteered at Braille Institute where I met some of the best piano players and artists in town. I was also a technical advisor on sets to several famous actors playing blind people, like Jamie Foxx in Ray.

What would you say to those who want to explore their creative side but don’t know where to start?

There are more outlets today for visually impaired people to be seen. YouTube and other online places have made it easier. There’s more acceptance than there was in my day, too. The visibility has increased in movies and shows. That wasn’t true in the 1970s. But what’s universal is that artists must have the will and the desire to keep going. Whatever happens in life, you find a way. And that’s the best way to live.

Listen to Carmen’s cabaret act online at www.youtube.com/user/carmenapelgren1

Paths to Giving

A Portrait of Giving Back from our Anaheim Community



Barbara Gray Richley, donor, client and volunteer

“My friend, Esther is a donor and volunteer too (pictured left) and we share the belief that community service is good citizenship. We were there for Braille Institute and I am blessed to have Braille Institute there for me!”

FREEWILL

A New Resource To Protect What You Love The Most

Braille Institute is excited to introduce a new resource that will support you and your loved ones’ future: a free estate planning tool. It’s simple, quick, and free. Scan the QR code for more information or get started at FreeWill.com/Braille.



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In This Issue • Performing Artist talks Showbiz Life • Braille Institute Instructors Share Inspiration



Creativity is all around us and often serves as a catalyst for new ideas, artistic innovations, and self-reflection. It manifests in many ways because we each have a unique creative ability that can be inspiring,

provocative, or even healing. Whether it's a backyard garden, an original poem or story, a new hairdo, or your own twist on a favorite dish – creativity is in our DNA. There are no limits when it comes to creativity, even for those without sight! I hope you will find the stories and insights on the pages ahead as informative and inspiring as I do.

Wishing you good health and happiness,

Gary Jimenez

Vice President of Development

Contact Information

Would you like to speak to someone about making a gift or do you have further questions?

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