

ASK THE EXPERTS: Erin Schalk on Accessibility-Driven Education



As Educational Programs Lead at Braille Institute (BIA), Erin Schalk, MA, MFA has focused on teaching in

accessibility-driven programs for individuals with visual impairments. Below are segments from Erin's talk with SCENE about her work, Mona H. and online learning.

A Fearless Student

I have been working with Mona since 2019 and have had the benefit to work with her both in in-person classes, as well as online. Mona always brings a great deal of passion, energy, and enthusiasm to my classes; she is a true maximizer and the first person to highlight the strengths and achievements of her fellow classmates. Mona has been especially active in my on-site studio art classes, as well as creative writing classes, and I am amazed at how fearless she is in her approach to her creative work. She is always open to trying new things and improving her skills.

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The Beat Goes On: A Longtime Dancer Learns New Steps

Mona H. is a former professional dancer and a current student at Braille Institute (BIA). She spoke with SCENE about losing her vision and her independence early in life and how she became self-empowered.

You were a dancer on the television show Soul Train! What was that experience like? When did you become low vision?

I began ballet at the Pasadena Dance Center while working at Bank of America out of high school. That's when the opportunity for Soul Train came up. I danced on the show one weekend out of every month from 1979 to 1993. It was fun and provided a lot of opportunities. I remember Stevie Wonder was on the show one time and I was seated with him and Aretha Franklin at the piano. We would also dance at other events like the Lakers halftime, the American Music Awards, and the Grammys. My vision started to become impaired in 1985 when I worked at the bank. I went from being "Employee of the Month" to suddenly having my work questioned. I've had my eyes examined over the years and I was diagnosed with iritis, uveitis and glaucoma in 1997, which started a host of surgeries.



What are the key challenges you've overcome along the way? What are you most excited about this year?

I've overcome fear and hopelessness. I've learned to advocate for myself. I've learned confidence and independence. I will continue with my Taekwondo class this year because it has been one of the most important things I do. Its philosophies are so positive. It teaches the philosophy of balance: not too little, not too much, always just enough. I'm currently a brown belt. I also take art class which has broadened my horizons in a great way. The class is so interactive. It helps us feel our best because we are creating beauty.

New Paths, New Journeys

Snapshots of our community members and their stories of growth.



Carole B.

Newport Beach, California

Carol is a psychology teacher at Orange Coast College as well as an author and a screenwriter. “I took technology courses and my fears about losing my independence melted away. Then, I enrolled in the art/ film history and screenwriting courses which helped me to thrive, and inspired me to become a better author and screenwriter.”

Willie D.

Riverside, California

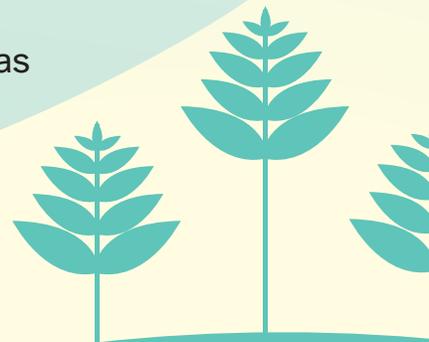
Willie was a chef at his own restaurant in New Orleans, one of many he owned before retiring with low vision. He received orientation and mobility training, as well as some bump dots to place on his stove and oven to help him in the kitchen. He’s gaining confidence and starting to do things he enjoys: “It’s amazing how I can feel around and navigate with the cane. Now I’m learning to walk backwards!”



Courtney S.

Iuka, Mississippi

Courtney lives in Mississippi and has been accessing classes online exclusively. “My appreciation for all types of art has grown, along with my confidence in creating art in different mediums. I am taking the techniques I’ve learned and will be teaching my first tactile art class online to others who are visually impaired.”



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Online Learning's Powerful Reach

A major challenge for students has been consistent transportation to our centers for in-person classes. What we've found is that online classes allow them to continue to learn no matter what's going on in their lives. It also compelled us to expand our online offerings, forcing our teaching staff to get creative. If what you teach is very hands-on or tactile based, such as art, you really must think through how you're teaching it. In addition, online learning has allowed us to expand our student base beyond Southern California. We now have students across the country and even internationally.

Challenges

There is a digital divide between those who have access and the willingness to work with online tools and those who don't. The over-arching term for addressing the challenges is flexibility. Our educational staff continues to be flexible by adapting their lesson plans for hybrid learning and our students are being flexible by embracing these new technologies. We must continue to be flexible as a community.

Looking Ahead

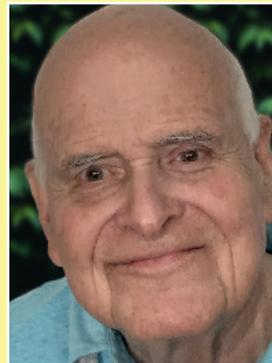
Our focus is really on driving high-quality educational programming that's going to empower our students and instructors. We really want to open up our doors to whoever may be in need, regardless of where they live in the world.

To get started with classes and workshops at Braille Institute, call (800) 272-4553 or go to brailleinstitute.org/classes for more information.

Paths to Giving

A portrait of giving back from our Los Angeles community.

“As a BIA donor and volunteer, it's inspiring to see how the classes, the library and the services have grown over the years to support the overall growth of the people who need it the most.”



Palmer Langdon, longtime donor and library volunteer, he excels at repairing the audiobook machines.

F R E E W I L L

A Valuable Resource To Protect What You Love The Most

Braille Institute is excited to provide a valuable 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.



In This Issue • Education Accessible to All • Dancer Makes New Moves



In this issue, SCENE proudly shines a light on people who are making their lives bigger and better. The classes and experiences they have had at Braille Institute have helped, but it's their own resilience and

desire to grow that have brought them success. The call to change and grow comes at different times based on individual circumstances, but it's a rewarding journey we all take together. I hope these stories inspire your growth, wherever you are on your path.

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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