

Hawaii Association of the Blind Newsletter

March 1, 2023

Upcoming Events

The Hawaii Association of the Blind's 56th Annual Convention is March 4, 2023 at Ala Moana Hotel

Friday, March 3, 2023

Ala Moana Hotel, Garden Lanai, Level 2

Time: 5:00-9:00 pm

Dinner Fees: Members - FREE=Guests - \$45

Saturday, March 4, 2023

Ala Moana Hotel

410 Atkinson Drive

Honolulu, Hawaii 96814

Hibiscus II Ballroom, Level 2

Free continental Breakfast will be provided at 7:30 AM

Registration: 8:00-9:00 am

Day Program starts at 9:00 am & concludes around 3:00 pm

Hosted Cocktails @ 5:30 pm – Banquet to Follow – Program Ends at 9:00 pm

Lunch Fees:

Members \$15

Guests \$25

Banquet Fees:

Members \$25

Guests \$40

HAB Membership Dues:

\$10

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Hawaii Association of the Blind annual convention returns in person

Hawaii Public Radio

By Dave Lawrence

For the first time in two years, the Hawaii Association of the Blind will be holding its 56th annual convention in person on O'ahu. The organization, established in 1967, advocates for blind residents and provides services.

HPR's Dave Lawrence talked with association member Vickie Kennedy about the upcoming event and what the results of the recent census reveal about those living with vision impairment in our islands.

The annual convention is happening on March 4 at the Ala Moana Hotel. Click here for more information.

This interview aired on The Conversation on Feb. 13, 2023. The Conversation airs weekdays at 11 a.m. on HPR-1.

To listen to the interview, go to:

<https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/the-conversation/2023-02-13/hawaii-association-of-the-blind-annual-convention-returns-in-person>

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HAB PAY STEAM event: Fishing Tales

By Tony Akamine

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon as I attended the February 11th STEAM (Science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) event in Wahiawa at Ali'i agriculture farms. There were 15 of

us that attended the event. One of the students started by reading in braille the characteristics of different types of fishes. Next, the participants were given a tactile picture that had 4 fishes on it. The goal was to follow the four different fishing lines to find 4 fishes. Finally, we transitioned to the pond with our bamboo fishing poles and our bait made from bread and water. The participants were so excited to be fishing for real fish. It was hilarious to watch Terri Lynn dirty her hands as she caught her first fish jumping actively as she tried to release the hook from the fish mouth. Thanks, Troy, for helping her dehook the fish. It took us some time to catch our first fish because the fishes ended up just eating the bait and not getting hooked. I was amazed at the size of the fishes we caught and the quantity. We probably had caught over 20 fishes that day.

Although we caught a lot of fishes, we only took the big ones to be fried and steamed in ginger and shoyu by the company. When our fishes arrived, it came out with rice, and a toss salad. While eating the participants were sharing with Terri Lynn how much fun they had today. One of the girls shared, she liked hanging out with friends, putting on the bait and waiting for the fish, but she did not want to touch the slippery slimy fish. One of the parents said they had such a good time with their entire family trying to get their turn in catching the big one. Finally, Crata shared that it was a good time with friends, and she enjoyed hanging out.

If you want to know more information about the upcoming STEAM events, please contact Keao or Anthony.

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Hawaii Association of the Blind (HAB) Appreciation Dinner and Bingo Gathering

By Tony Akamine

After a couple of years gathering virtually, the New Year's party was an in-person event. It was refreshing and loads of fun. Although I still enjoy virtual meetings as I can watch in my pajamas, this event truly was a worthwhile gathering full of a vast variety of food from Da Spot. I was amazed at the selection of seafood, meats, veggies, local kind grinds including noodles and sticky white rice along with yummy desserts. Mahalo Howard for helping to make your space available. I am grateful for Norman and Amelia for teaching me about the power of an invite. One of my lasting memories of serving was when I came out as a guest and Amelia said I looked good in a white beard, red outfit, and black boots. Oh, what a joy. I was happy to serve and be flexible. This event was extra special as I got to invite some friends to be my guests. They came to enjoy the fun, but also come to serve and lend a helping hand.

Thank you to Warren and Filo for teaching me to have an attitude of gratitude and sharing the love and aloha. Thank you to all for coming out and sharing in the fun. Mahalo to Amy, Brian, and the events crew for providing a helping hand in making this occasion a special one.

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HAB Member's Appreciation Party: Good Food, Good Times, and Good Vibes

By Terri-lynn Higashi

Hawaii Association of the Blind had their New Year's dinner and Bingo party on January 21, 2023.

The Hawaii Association of the Blind came together to celebrate and ring in another New Year with good food and bingo. It was a great time for the members to enjoy laughing with friends, eating great food, and of course shouting BINGO. Mahalo to Miles for providing that heart felt blessing for the evening and to Shareen for calling out the Bingo numbers with so much energy. The humbling beginnings of the party started over 50 years ago from our founder Warren Toyama as a thank you to the members for their hard work throughout the year.

As I reflect on that evening, I thought of all the people of HAB, their family, and friends that have come through the years to just enjoy a time of celebration. Years ago, I was asked by Miss Nora Ota to come and play Bingo with HAB. This small act of kindness has led me down a path of becoming a member meeting such beautiful people that I am blessed enough to call friends as well as a wife to a loving husband. It reminded me that this party was a time to celebrate, but also to pass on those good vibes of laughter, generosity, and stability that comes with celebrating for over 50 years. Hats off to those who made this memorable gathering possible.

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A poem about humility

By Terri Lynn Higashi

Humility is gentle, kind, and forgiving
Even if it is planted into us by God
Some of us never water and nurture the seed of humility
We allow it to just sit within us never to be seen by anyone else.
It takes a special person to water humility with gentleness, kindness, forgiveness
When humility is watered it sprouts into a beautiful person
And a person whose very essence is the picture of humility
By the way they live, treat others, & how they view the world.
It is a blessing to meet a person of humility, but it is hard to find one
Not because they don't exist, but rather we don't take the time to look for one
It is only when we ourselves start to water our own seed of humility
Do we become aware of the beautiful examples the Lord has brought into our lives
They are brought into our lives to show us that the Lord does live in us and through us
And also to remind us that we too can be people of humility filled with gentleness, kindness,
and forgiveness.

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From Honolulu Civil Beat

Why Blind Students Struggle To Get Braille Textbooks On Time

Legislators are considering a bill that would force public schools to provide timely instructional material.

By Cassie Ordonio

February 10, 2023

Emerie Mitchell-Butler went five months without a textbook for her Advanced Placement biology class even though the rest of her classmates received theirs on the first day of school.

That would be rough for any student, but Mitchell-Butler is blind and depends on braille and tactile graphics to understand complicated diagrams, charts, and graphs through her fingertips.

Although the state Department of Education provided her with an online version, Mitchell-Butler said the pictures and diagrams can't be interpreted by the screen reader that usually converts text to sound.

"It's incredibly unhelpful," she said. "It has absolutely no information. It might have the title of the graphic but nothing else."

Mitchell-Butler said she got her hardcopy braille textbook in January. Now she only has four months to prepare for her AP exam scheduled for May, while her sighted peers have had the whole school year to prepare.

While preparing for the AP exam, Mitchell-Butler said she's aware that the exams will be mostly diagram heavy.

"The other students had the time to practice looking at a diagram and understanding it quickly," Mitchell-Butler said.

Mitchell-Butler said she feels bad for her teacher because she has to do more work to help her understand the graphs when she should have had her textbook.

Emerie Mitchell-Butler has about five months to study for her Advanced Placement biology exam, which she says will mostly consist of interpreting diagrams. She said she needs tactile graphics in order for her to understand the diagrams. Tactile graphics are allow blind students visually read images through their fingertips. (Courtesy: Tabatha Mitchell/2023)

Emerie Mitchell-Butler said she needs tactile graphics in order to understand diagrams. The tables and graphs are integral to her AP biology exam scheduled for May. (Courtesy: Tabatha Mitchell/2023)

Hawaii passed a law about 20 years ago requiring textbook publishers to provide an electronic file to the school system so the textbooks can be produced. But advocates say the current state law is outdated and doesn't reflect a 2004 federal law that requires publishers to provide recent electronic files to the American Printing House for the Blind, that produces the resources.

The National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard that underpins federal law is intended to ensure blind and visually impaired students have access to textbooks and other educational materials promptly.

Although the Hawaii Department of Education says it adopted the federal standard, it's not memorialized in state law.

House Bill 388, which passed out of the House Education Committee and awaits a hearing from the House Finance Committee, would adopt the federal standard and bind the department to provide timely instructional materials for eligible students.

The DOE did not respond directly to questions about why Mitchell-Butler's textbook arrived later in the school year, but during a January hearing in the Legislature department officials supported the measure and apologized to Mitchell-Butler, saying her AP textbooks were more difficult to obtain.

Mitchell-Butler and her mother, Tabatha Mitchell, know the drill to prepare for the new school year. Mitchell said she has to request ahead of time to let her daughter's teacher know that she needs specific textbooks, like science and math, in hard copy braille material.

"It's not a big surprise, and this is my frustration as a mom. As a parent, I know how things go in the Individualized Education Program meetings, and what we talk about. I know that everybody supposedly understands, and yet the school year starts and she still doesn't have the book," Mitchell said.

The Challenge Of Being Exceptional

Hawaii is not unique when it comes to failing to deliver textbooks to blind students on time, according to Dan Stewart of the National Disability Rights Network.

“Throughout the nation and federal territories, we’ve heard similar stories that materials are not accessible and not timely provided,” Stewart said. “So regardless of Hawaii’s statute, this is still a federal requirement that has been in place for quite a long time and should’ve helped the student get the materials a whole lot sooner.”

In 2020, there were 270 blind and visually impaired students in Hawaii’s public schools, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported. More current numbers were not immediately available.

Virgil Stinnett, president of the National Federation of the Blind Hawaii, said the point of using the American Printing House for the Blind is to get the material back to the department as quickly as possible.

“I’ll be honest with you, the DOE system is slow, and when it comes to children who are blind and visually impaired, they’re not a priority to them,” Stinnett said. “If a child has to wait a month to three months for material to come in when their peers surpassed them a few months ago, it’s too late.”

Anastacia Fong, with her daughter Eliana Fong, work through Eliana’s homework after a day at Waikiki Elementary School. (David Croxford/Civil Beat/2023)

Those delays are also a concern for Anastacia Fong, mother of a 9-year-old daughter, Eliana, who is blind. Her daughter currently attends Waikiki Elementary School and says the school strives to be inclusive and mindful of children on campus.

But Fong said Eliana has sometimes been left out of activities like library visits because there wasn’t enough braille material for her in advance, Fong said.

“She already is so blatantly different from all the other kids that to have her excluded from doing the same things as her classmates at the same time, or taken out of an activity just because there’s no braille for her, is truly heartbreaking,” Fong said.

Fong added that although her school tries, she’s more worried when her daughter goes into higher-level classes.

The problem is systemic according to James Gashel, legislative director for the blind advocacy group National Federation of the Blind.

He underscored that students like Mitchell-Butler should have her textbook the first day of class, adding that blind students must work twice as hard to catch up.

“They call these kids ‘exceptional children,’ and the one thing you don’t want to be in this world is exceptional,” Gashel said. “It might sound like a compliment, but if you’re exceptional, that means you don’t get what other people get even though you should. “

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From American Council of the Blind

Nearly 5 decades of broken promises to the blind and low vision community has left the United States an outlier in the developed world – the only country whose paper currency is inaccessible to those with disabilities. But together we can push the Biden Administration and US Treasury to put us on a course to accessible and inclusive currency for all.

The US Treasury is currently redesigning the \$20 bill to include a portrait of Harriet Tubman, and a 2008 Federal Court Order says that any new currency redesigns must include accommodations to individuals who are blind or low vision. The Administration is hoping to sneak through the redesign without making the bills accessible – they’re hoping we won’t notice or put up a fight.

That’s why on March 10th – Harriet Tubman Day – we’re coming together for a rally in front of the White House with one clear demand: we need accessible and inclusive currency now! Join us at 1:30pm in Lafayette Square and let’s show the Administration we won’t let them kick the can down the road again!

This isn’t rocket science. The solutions are clear – different size notes, braille, large print denominations, high color contrast – that’s why they’ve been implemented by over a hundred countries around the world.

It's time for the Biden Administration to step up to the plate and commit to currency that's both accessible and inclusive. Let's show them we're serious – Click here to RSVP. Even if you can't make it in person, you can still RSVP for the rally to show your support!

Since 1961 the American Council of the Blind has been working to increase the independence, security, equality of opportunity, and to improve the quality of life of all individuals who are blind or experiencing vision loss – see you on March 10th to keep up the fight.

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After 112 years, ABVI rebranding as Goodwill Vision to help more people with visual impairments

Published January 18, 2023 at 5:17 PM EST

By Randy Gorbman

WXXI News

A well-known local organization that helps people with vision problems is changing its name. The Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ABVI) has been around since 1911.

But as of late last year, the non-profit has a new name. It's now called Goodwill Vision Enterprises.

ABVI is part of Goodwill, and the organization's CEO and President Jen Lake, said one reason for the name change is some people who are starting to lose their vision are hesitant to seek out rehabilitation and other services because they don't like to be classified as blind.

"In talking to people we realized that our name itself, the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, while it describes what we do, it also creates a barrier to people wanting to move forward," Lake said.

Lake said the name change could help encourage people to come to Goodwill Vision Enterprises to take advantage of their programs and services.

“(It) will really open the possibilities to people coming to see us sooner, and also allowing people in the community who haven’t been connected to us to understand that Goodwill does something with vision services, with eyecare,” Lake said.

Lake said Goodwill Vision Enterprises has a range of rehabilitative services and adaptive technologies that can help people who have impaired vision improve their quality of life.

The organization expects increased demand for its services, since a study by the National Eye Institute expects the number of people with visual impairment or blindness in the U.S. to double to more than 8 million people by 2050, due in part to an increase in the number of older people.

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The nation’s largest organization for blind people faces lawsuit alleging widespread sexual misconduct and lack of accountability

By Emma Tucker, CNN

Published 6:58 PM EST, Fri January 6, 2023

The National Federation of the Blind, founded in 1940 and headquartered in Baltimore, consists of affiliates, chapters and divisions in all 50 states.

The National Federation of the Blind, founded in 1940 and headquartered in Baltimore, consists of affiliates, chapters and divisions in all 50 states.

From The National Federation of the Blind

The largest and oldest nationwide group advocating for the rights of blind people was sued Friday for allegedly failing to protect its students, including minors, from known sexual abusers employed by the organization in a culture the lawsuit claims enabled the abuse to continue for years.

The lawsuit against the National Federation of the Blind was filed by attorneys representing Alyssa Mendez, 20, who is legally blind and says she was repeatedly sexually assaulted when she was 16 by her instructor, Michael Ausbun, while attending a training program in 2018 at an NFB-affiliated center in Louisiana.

Ausbun was 22 years old at the time he is accused of first sexually assaulting Mendez. Ausbun denies the allegations, his lawyer told CNN.

The NFB, founded in 1940 and headquartered in Baltimore, consists of affiliates, chapters and divisions in all 50 states and coordinates “programs, services, and resources to defend the rights of blind Americans,” according to its website.

The lawsuit, filed in Baltimore City Circuit Court, is seeking damages from the NFB on four counts, including battery; negligence; negligent hiring, training, supervision and retention; and violation of requirements to report suspected abuse of a child under Maryland law.

In the lawsuit, Mendez said her mother told the NFB’s leadership about Ausbun sexually assaulting her daughter, but even afterward, the lawsuit alleges, the NFB “still failed to exact any punishment.”

Police Department spokesperson Chad Ditch during a presser.

Kansas sexual assault suspect accused of kidnapping children was taken into custody, police say

The NFB has “long known that sexual predators worked within its organizations to take advantage of the blind,” the lawsuit claims. There had been three complaints about Ausbun before the NFB launched the investigation, the lawsuit contends.

The NFB declined to comment on the allegations in the lawsuit due to the pending litigation, Chris Danielsen, director of public relations, told CNN in a phone call Friday.

In December 2020, after Mendez and others shared their alleged stories of abuse publicly, the NFB's president acknowledged "some" people had been "abused or violated" by an NFB member, "and/or made to feel like no one else was listening."

After looking into the allegations against Ausbun, the organization suspended him in 2020 with the possibility of returning as a member after five years, the lawsuit says.

In June 2021, Ausbun was arrested for allegedly molesting a minor – Mendez – and was then indicted after Mendez testified before a grand jury in Ruston, Louisiana, according to her attorneys.

Eric Johnson, a lawyer representing Ausbun, said in a statement to CNN his client denies the allegations. Ausbun formally entered a plea of not guilty to the charges against him.

"Since the case is pending, Mr. Ausbun maintains his complete innocence of any and all allegations or charges made by the alleged victim," Johnson told CNN in a phone call Friday, speaking about the allegations in the lawsuit against his client.

Lack of urgency, initially, lawsuit claims

After the NFB suspended Ausbun, Mendez said she was frustrated with what she perceived to be his light punishment, according to the lawsuit. Mendez decided in December 2020 to give a public account on social media detailing the sexual assault she says she suffered at the hands of Ausbun, which she says then prompted several others in the blind community to share similar experiences of misconduct while involved in NFB programs.

As more alleged victims came forward, NFB President Mark Riccobono released an "open letter of apology" for what he described as the organization's failure "if a survivor was left feeling the situation went unaddressed."

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What to do if you're asked to sign a non-compete agreement

Hundreds of victims, survivors and witnesses of sexual misconduct in NFB programs, and their allies and supporters, signed an open letter demanding the organization take action to "reduce and eliminate the widespread instances" of abuse within NFB agencies. The open letter was published on the same day as Riccobono's public apology letter, according to Mendez's lawyers.

“I think that because it [the abuse] was happening for so long, it’s frustrating because it doesn’t really feel like anything has changed,” Mendez told CNN in an interview this week, referring to the time period after hundreds signed the open letter in December 2020, calling on the NFB to implement changes.

The NFB formed a special committee to investigate the claims in January 2021, which revealed in its final report on November 11, 2021, 84 complaints alleging sexual misconduct were submitted to NFB leadership between December 2020, and November 2021, the report states.

Mendez was groomed, stalked, suit says

In 2018, Mendez traveled to Ruston, Louisiana, from her home in Florida to undergo a two-month training program at the Louisiana Center for the Blind, which provided housing for her, the lawsuit says. The program aims to help blind individuals develop skills for everyday life, emphasizing a “positive attitude toward blindness,” according to the lawsuit.

On her first day as a trainee, Mendez was sexually assaulted by Ausbun, who was her orientation and mobility instructor, the lawsuit maintains, and who also served as the vice president of the NFB’s National Association of Blind Students division. In the following weeks, Ausbun shared personal details about his life with Mendez “in an effort to groom her and started hugging her and touching her shoulders and hair,” both in public and private, the lawsuit claims.

Several employees noticed what the lawsuit described as Ausbun’s “inappropriate behavior” and notified two members of the NFB’s leadership, including one person who provided photo evidence of him touching Mendez, the lawsuit says. The Louisiana Center for the Blind revoked Ausbun’s National Orientation and Mobility Certification, but did not punish him further, the lawsuit alleges; he was allowed him to continue attending NFB activities and events, it says.

The NFB runs the Louisiana Center for the Blind as one of its affiliate centers. CNN contacted the center for comment on the lawsuit but did not immediately receive a response.

Alyssa Mendez, 20, is a plaintiff in the lawsuit against the National Federation of the Blind.

O'Mara Law Group

The abuse allegedly continued even after Mendez completed the training program, the lawsuit says. According to allegations of the lawsuit, Mendez’s mother, Kimberly Banks, who was active in the NFB’s

parents' division, invited Ausbun to stay at the family's home in Florida without knowing at the time he had allegedly had unwanted contact with her daughter.

While Ausbun stayed at their home, he continued to sexually assault Mendez, the lawsuit says.

Mendez's brother saw Ausbun "try to kiss" her and told their mother, the lawsuit says. Mendez told CNN she informed Banks she was being sexually abused by Ausbun. Banks then "immediately" reported the abuse to NFB leadership, but officials did not take any steps to punish him, the lawsuit contends.

"It was really hard for her," Mendez told CNN, speaking about her mother. "I really don't think she knew what to do," adding her mother trusted the NFB to properly handle Ausbun's alleged misconduct.

But the following year in 2019, Ausbun attended a national convention in Las Vegas where he "stalked" Mendez and her friends, the lawsuit alleges.

In October 2019, Mendez personally reported her abuse to NFB leadership, which led to an investigation lasting eight months, she told CNN.

Actor and Comedian Bill Cosby arrives at the Montgomery County Courthouse for sentencing in his sexual assault trial in Norristown, Pennsylvania, U.S. September 24, 2018. REUTERS/Brendan McDermid

Bill Cosby sued for sexual battery under new New York lookback law, following similar lawsuit from 5 accusers

Riccobono informed Mendez Ausbun would be suspended from the NFB for five years, allowing him "to return to the organization should he meet certain, confidential guidelines," the lawsuit claims. The president allegedly explained the NFB "decided that a light punishment was best," because of Ausbun's "marital status," the lawsuit states, without further explanation.

That's when Mendez decided she would share her story publicly, writing in a Facebook post on December 12, 2020: "I wanted to share what happened to me, in hopes that it could help others. I want to encourage other survivors to share their stories, and use their voices in whatever way they choose."

The support Mendez received compelled her to report Ausbun's abuse to the Ruston Police Department, which then launched a criminal investigation, the lawsuit says. In June 2021, Ausbun was arrested for molesting a minor and was then indicted on 18 counts of molestation of a minor, charging documents show.

NFB vows action

The lawsuit claims Pam Allen, vice president and chair of the board of NFB, as well as Riccobono, were aware of misconduct within the organization "for years," but they continue to hold their leadership roles.

CNN posed several questions in its request for comment from the NFB, including whether Allen and Riccobono were aware of ongoing misconduct and what, if any, disciplinary action was taken against them. A spokesperson for the NFB said it declines to comment on the lawsuit. CNN also contacted Allen and Riccobono for comment on the allegations but has not received a response.

"Instead of properly dealing with abusers within NFB ranks, the offenders were moved around in the organization and sometimes moved up in the organization," the lawsuit says.

In his open letter of apology in December 2020, Riccobono said the NFB was committed to addressing misconduct, including improving reporting incidents and bolstering training on handling misconduct and abuse.

"We deeply regret that over our eighty years we have not handled each situation appropriately or been able to heal the pain that such incidents create. We do not reject these feelings of pain. In fact, we want to find and establish better ways to hear them and continuously eliminate the actions that caused them," Riccobono wrote.

In January 2021, Riccobono said the NFB was partnering with the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network to create a mandatory training program on sexual violence and misconduct for all of its members. The same month, the president created a "survivor-led" task force to represent survivors and address and prevent misconduct at the NFB.

On January 6, 2021, the NFB board voted to create a special committee to oversee an internal investigation of the misconduct allegations. The committee released its final report in November 2021, emphasizing "the need for putting in place a mechanism for checking in on the safety of participants, particularly those who are younger," it states.

Mendez said she is comforted by the overwhelming support she has received from others after sharing her story, and she hopes the lawsuit will encourage other victims of abuse to come forward.

“It was really nice not to feel so alone in this. And I think, hopefully, it helped other people to not feel so alone either,” she said.

Ausbun’s criminal case is pending and has not been set for trial yet, Johnson, his lawyer told CNN. His next court date is scheduled in February in Lincoln Parrish, Louisiana. * *