

GUBERNATORIAL APPOINTMENT: Idaho Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Idaho State Legislature

Senate Committee

Health and Welfare

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Testimony

Chairman Martin and members of the Committee, my name is Mark Watkins. I am from Rexburg.

I attended the Assessment and Training Center during the summer term, 2020. This was a marvelous experience and I learn much from the exceptional faculty. I am still developing from the foundation they provided. In December of the same year, I received a note from Greg Metsker and Alan Schneider inquiring about the possibility of joining the ICBVI Board. I was still a client with Vocational Rehabilitation. My case was closed in August, 2021; I submitted requisite application and other paper work later that fall.

I was honored to be asked to join the Board, feeling much respect for the people I had worked with: Greg Metsker and the ATC faculty, Matt Queen, Mike Walsh, Alan Schneider and other welcoming members of the Board. Reading the minutes of the October meeting and preparatory reports for the February 16 meeting gave me even more respect for the many programs and workers in Idaho helping the blind and visually impaired.

It will take some time and study for me to more fully understand the initiatives of the ICBVI. It is apparent that Covid has hindered work in Idaho, as it has across the nation. Amidst this pandemic, the ICBVI is trying to help as many people as possible, and demonstrating that lowered numbers are not indicative of a lack of need or unsuccessful programs or employees, that statistics showing the values of current initiatives will touch more individuals, returning to previous numbers when Covid has settled. There are several new employees working around the state, it seems that I am in good company as I strive to learn how to be useful to the ICBVI.

I have been legally blind for the majority of my life. I was born blind with detached retinas. There was a doctor in St. Louis where I was born that was working on retinal reattachment in 1961 using what was described to me as a heat ray. I am told that I was the first subject, and that the procedure is the predecessor of laser reattachment methods developed in the 1980s. As a youth in San Diego, I was placed in a special education program, which had me bused across town and disallowed to attend school with my brother and neighborhood friends. The program had me attend regular classes half day and the special school the other half. It was well-intended, but imagine being nearly blind and having to keep up with other students while only being with the class half time. My memories of the special class are not fond. When my family moved to Hawaii, my parents mainstreamed my education by not telling anyone I was legally blind. Through the years, I learned how to survive. It was challenging, causing me to not be self-conscious. I had some great teachers, like Mr. Tucker in Mississippi, who had me come to the board while he read the information to me and wouldn't continue until I had everything—a marvelous man. At other times, it was rough. Once, in Ohio, a substitute teacher sent me to the principal's office for standing behind her while she wrote on the board. Though the class confirmed that I was only trying to read what she was writing, she didn't believe; I didn't blame her, since it was out of her experience.

I'm not sure that programs for the blind and visually impaired were very developed in the 1960s and '70s where I lived. I recall my legally blind cousin attending a school for the blind in his state, but not being pleased. He had a hard time with his blindness—the school may have been fine. On occasion, my father would find a specialist who would show me low vision aids, the quality of which improved over time; my first monocular (I have always been totally blind in one eye, which is a prosthetic now) that was an inch deep cylindrical drilled into a regular glasses lens—it kept falling out. My next was a bulky sighting scope for target shooting, which I had into college.

My cousin introduced me to Utah State Vocational Rehabilitation in 1979 and his counselor, Shirley Atchison. She was amazing. Through VR, I made it through my undergraduate degree in state, and my master's out of state. In Salt Lake, there was a

better supplied low vision clinic than I had seen anywhere else up to this time. After this period with Utah Vocational Rehabilitation, government help became unnecessary. I finished a doctorate and obtained employment. Many of the devices and means since then have been obtained or created as per my specific need, such as a special music reader, rather expensive to build.

Of interest to the committee may be my approximately 30 years working with the Boy Scouts of America. From 1988 through 2019, I served as a scout master through three states. My last work was with the New Scout Patrol of 11-year-old young men, which was concurrent for over 10 years. Working in this capacity was rewarding and challenging. However, coping mechanisms for my blindness were found—such as challenging the scouts to tie knots with their eyes closed. Of course, I had many wonderful assistants.

Most recently, my vision has deteriorated to total blindness—a short fight with glaucoma beginning in the fall of 2016. Fortunately, I have supportive administrators where I work as a professor of music. I contacted Matt Queen through advice from my ophthalmologist. He connected me with the Idaho Falls branch. I don't recall the person's name that worked with me there, but she was most helpful, providing me with the McDuffy Reader for Brail, a Braille machine, a correctly sized cane, and other devices. Matt provided an iPhone, which I didn't know I needed—my Android works fine, thank you. Later, I learned much from Lisa Baker about how to use Voice Over, which Scott Pearl told me is much superior to the accessibility program for Android. Matt also informed me of the ATC with regular encouragement to attend. Eventually, my sight was bad enough that I new I needed serious help.

Even after the ATC, I had and still have much to learn, much of which is specific to my job. I keep picking up new ways and means. I have learned independence, but also humility to allow others to help me with things I just can't do—at least not yet.

I am impressed and very grateful to the people in Idaho and the ICBVI for the valuable and kindly help I have received. If I can return anything, I am happy to do so.

Sincerely,

Mark Watkins