Art Schreiber

Blind Leading the Not Blind

 by Jim Belshaw

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From the Editor: Art Schreiber is President of the NFB of New

Mexico. His friend, Jim Belshaw, is an unwilling radio personality. He also writes for the local newspaper, the Albuquerque Journal. On March 29, 2000, an interesting and somewhat unusual account of the banquet evening of the NFB of New Mexico’s annual convention appeared under Belshaw's byline. Here it is:

Every Monday afternoon I drive to the Park Plaza condos, pickup my babysitter, Art Schreiber, and drive to the KBTK radio studios, where the veteran broadcaster holds my hand while I pretend to be a talk-show host.

This past Monday, as usual, we're talking over the preceding week's events when Art mentions the Great Power Outage of '00 in which more than one million people were sent into the dark on a Saturday night.

I tell Art I was making my way through the intersection of Louisiana and Indian School, and traffic was backed up forever, but almost everybody was civil about it. There was no riot, and eventually people made it through the intersections all over town without calling out militias or even out-of-work but still hopeful Y2K prophets.

Art said he was at a banquet that night at the Wyndham Garden Hotel, and one of the hotel employees asked him, "How are you going to eat in the dark?"

A question for the ages. A perfect question. Asked at exactly the right moment, as the state went dark and the tables turned.

"I don't think it's going to be a problem," Art said to the hotel worker.

When the lights went out, Art said, he didn't give it much thought. Neither did the other 100 blind people that night. Art is the President of the New Mexico affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind. The banquet was closing out the group's convention.

"Nobody got upset when we found out," he said. "In the first place, most of the people in our group didn't know the lights had gone out. The totally blind people certainly didn't know, and those of us called partials, well, we knew something had happened, but we figured it was just a hotel thing. In any case, the nice thing about the Federation is that most Federationists are skilled blind people. They have good blind skills."

Art figured the elevators were out, so he walked upstairs to his room to get ready for the banquet. Nobody had to help him. On his way back to the banquet room, he said he came across sighted hotel guests who had a question.

"They didn't know where they were," he said. "I told them they were on the mezzanine, and I asked where they wanted to go. They said downstairs.

I said come with me. Nobody said a word about me being blind, and you know, that's not unusual. Blind people and white canes kind of intimidate people. But I'm sure they were very grateful they had somebody who could find his way around in the dark."

He went back up to the mezzanine and found workers setting up tables for the banquet. It was then that one of them wondered how all those blind people were going to eat in the dark.

"The biggest problem with blindness is the attitude of sighted people," Art said. "There is this attitude that we're incompetent, that we can't work, that sort of thing. I could take you to a National Convention and introduce you to almost every walk of life. I thought that night (of the power outage) that it was great people could see we do the same things everybody else does and that there are many things we do well, though we might do them differently, with alternative techniques."

After the banquet a maintenance man asked convention chairwoman Christine Hall to thank all of the blind conventioneers who helped guests and hotel employees during the power outage.

The lights had come back on by the time dinner was served. Everything was back to, well, normal, which suddenly became all relative on the night of the Great Blackout of '00.

Outside, the traffic went back to running yellow lights and stopping at some of the red ones; in the Wyndham Garden Hotel conventioneers enjoyed a meal.

"I was grateful we could get through it without a great fuss," Art said. "But it was funny that no one talked about it. It wasn't even mentioned

At the banquet in the speech."