

SPECTRIOS INSTITUTE FOR LOW VISION

THE BRIGHTSIDE



**“
You are not
defined by your
condition,
but by your
spirit and
determination
to live fully.
”**

Finding Strength in the Face of Dual Sensory Loss: Jennifer's Journey

Jennifer's journey began early, marked by challenges that few could see. From childhood, she struggled with vision and hearing issues that her family noticed but could not fully understand. Despite numerous doctor visits, no one could identify the cause. By age three, she was using hearing aids and glasses, navigating a world that felt increasingly distant.

In her late 20s, a visit to Northwest Eyecare in Oregon, Illinois, changed everything. Dr. Jessica Condie diagnosed her with Retinitis Pigmentosa, a genetic disorder causing gradual vision loss. This diagnosis ignited a spark within Jennifer. She began researching the connection between her vision and hearing challenges. When she learned about Usher Syndrome—a rare genetic condition that leads to both hearing and vision loss—she experienced a profound “Aha moment.” The diagnosis, while “overwhelming”, gave her a new sense of direction.

Referred to Spectrios Institute for specialized care, Jennifer met Dr. Williams, who reassured her, “There is so much you can do. You’re not done yet.” After years of doctors telling her there was nothing to be done, she felt relief to hear there were options.

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What's New in Access Technology? by Mark Chalmers

When patients visit our Technology Center, one of the first questions we often hear is, "What's new?" Chris and I are always on the lookout for the latest devices that make life easier, open new ways to accomplish everyday tasks, and bring the best accessibility features. With every advance in technology, we're committed to bringing in the most effective tools to help our patients compensate for their vision loss.

Recently, we've added incredible new devices, including the Explore 12 digital magnifier, the Mezzo Focus desktop magnifier, the LyriQ Reader, and the OrCam Read 3 with a stand. These tools have been life-changing for our patients, offering them more independence and ease in reading, studying, working, and everyday living. We also work hard to keep our computers and tablets equipped with the latest software and accessibility features so that every patient has what they need to thrive.

We can only do this with your support. Your donation allows us to invest in technology and resources that help our patients reach their full potential at school, work, and home. Please consider making a gift today to ensure we can continue offering the very best in access technology. Visit spectrios.org/donate to contribute. Together, we're making a difference in the lives of people with vision loss!



A Message from Peter Whinfrey Chairman of the Board

In July, I was invited to support a team of blinded combat veterans at Fort Carson, Colorado, who teamed up to take on the "Tough Mudder"—a grueling long-distance obstacle course designed to challenge even the most able-bodied individuals.

Our team, known as Blind Endeavors, performed well and finished strong. Each vet was guided by 2-3 Junior ROTC cadets from a nearby high school, who not only provided assistance but also ran the course alongside them. The course spanned about 8 miles in the Rocky Mountain foothills, requiring participants to crawl beneath netting, swing through rings and jungle gym bars, and navigate several chest-deep water trenches, among other obstacles.

It was truly awe-inspiring to witness Blind Endeavors compete alongside fully sighted, physically fit participants and to be part of the support group cheering them on. As our team worked through each obstacle, I couldn't help but reflect on both the differences and the similarities in our vision loss journeys. I have lived with progressive vision loss for 35 years—a continuum of haze, glare, distortion, and dark spots. Unlike these six young men, however, I still have some peripheral vision and light perception. These men lost their sight instantly and completely while deployed. They will never again have any light perception. Despite losing our sight in different ways, I came to understand that the challenges of living with vision loss are remarkably similar. We all share a spirit of tenacity, and the event was a wonderful opportunity to support each other and laugh together about the unique situations we face. I spoke to each veteran and I found not one trace of regret, bitterness, or self-pity, among any of them, which I found profoundly inspiring.



Participating in the Tough Mudder was a truly memorable experience, and I felt proud and honored to be part of the Blind Endeavors team. I stand in awe of these men and the young cadets who helped them achieve such an impressive goal. The cadets learned an invaluable lesson: that helping others is one of the highest and greatest callings in life.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Spectrios Institute, thank you in advance for your support in empowering children and adults with vision loss to live independently and with tenacious spirits. God bless.

Peter

Jennifer's Story Continued...

Jennifer recognized her own tendencies to dismiss challenges, saying, “I can be stubborn. If I struggle to see something, I often just dismiss it.” Dr. Williams encouraged her to think differently, urging her to engage her memory and stay open to possibilities.

Navigating her dual sensory loss can be frustrating, particularly when others struggle to understand her experience. “A lot of people don’t get it,” she shared. “I’m still walking, using my phone.” Having her husband attend her appointments made a big difference. Dr. Williams’ support helped him grasp the reality of her challenges. Bridging this gap and giving him a deeper insight was helpful in her journey.

Jennifer also worked with occupational therapist Katrina, who introduced her to tools like tinted screen clips and specialized keyboards. They explored mobility options and strategies to enhance her daily life despite her vision loss.

Though the pain of losing her sight and hearing is profound, Jennifer remains determined. This past April, she made the difficult decision to give up driving. “Being independent, losing that freedom forced me to rely on others,” she said. “As hard as it is, you must know when to let go.” Everyday tasks like grocery shopping and dining out became increasingly challenging, especially in dimly lit restaurants.

For years, Jennifer managed her family’s tree service, but as her vision deteriorated, she reevaluated her role. Coping became about staying engaged, so when her crew found baby squirrels and raccoons, they brought them to her for rehabilitation. “I started caring for them until they were old enough to be released,” she explained. Now, as feeding the animals becomes more difficult, she’s pivoting her focus to a new goal: reading the Bible from cover to cover with the help of an accessibility app. “Set small goals,” she advised. “You have to find something to cling to. Search for joy and strive for something meaningful.”

Jennifer, now near 40, is adapting to her new reality. She uses a cane, and her husband and daughter are always ready to offer their arms for support. With the help of apps that magnify text and read aloud, she continues to enjoy reading and dining out with family and friends. Jennifer is her own advocate and inspires others to do the same, believing that our spirit and determination—not our condition—define who we are.

At Spectrios, we embrace this philosophy through our “head, heart, and eye” approach. By focusing on the whole person and working alongside the medical team to manage vision loss, we bring hope. We empower people to reach their rehabilitation goals, live independently, and uplift others, staying active in their communities despite visual challenges. We’re inspired by Jennifer’s outlook on life, which she says keeps her moving forward: “I have that attitude, like... you’re gonna try to keep me down? Oh, yeah? Watch me.” Her words remind us all of the power of resilience and strength—that our spirit can shine, even in the toughest moments.

Letting the Kids be Kids

by Dr. Katie Niermann, OD, MS, FAAO

“I’m so happy my kid can just be a kid.” This heartfelt remark was by a mother picking up her teen from our Grandma Martyl Summer Camp last June. I leaned in close to hear her, as the campers were full of belly laughs and loud chatter behind us.

Letting the kids be kids is exactly what our Seeing is Believing (SIB) children’s programs aim to achieve. With the right tools, children with visual impairments can learn, play, and enjoy life without limits. The summer camp is one of several programs by SIB. These include virtual transition camps and a mobile clinic for children with low vision. This school year alone, we have scheduled over 50 SIB children’s clinics!



As a low vision doctor and Director of Children's Programs at Spectrios, I often measure vision and prescribe tools. These include spectacles, monocular telescopes, magnifiers, and sunglass tints. This is incredibly valuable, but the real magic comes in what these devices can help kids achieve. A telescope lets a 14-year-old with albinism see a menu from far away at a restaurant with his friends. A magnifier helps an 11-year-old see the difference between a period and a comma on her math homework. A 6-year-old with achromatopsia can now open her eyes and not quint. A pair of tinted sunglasses lets her do this, pain-free, for the first time in her life.

Each SIB clinic provides a comprehensive low vision evaluation and any needed optical devices at no charge to the child and their family. I cannot thank our generous donors enough. They make this possible. I feel so lucky to care for children with low vision. I get to witness countless “wow!” reactions from kids when they use a tool for the first time. I also have the privilege of watching the immediate relief on the faces of the child’s family. Yes, your kid can get the help they need to just be a kid.

Your support can transform the life of someone with vision loss.



Empower Lives Today! Scan the QR code to donate and help provide vital tools and life-changing services for children and adults with low vision. Every gift drives our mission to break barriers and inspire potential. **Say YES to making a difference now!**



The Impact of a Comprehensive Approach: Olya's Story

by Dr. Rachel Park, OD & Katrina Stratton, MS, OTR/L

Meet Olya, a resilient patient whose journey with advanced glaucoma led her to seek new ways of maintaining her independence. Through our comprehensive approach, she's found the tools and support to continue doing what she loves—traveling, reading, and spending time with family.

Despite her determination, Olya's vision loss—about 80% after multiple eye surgeries—drastically altered her life. In just a few years, she had to give up driving, her work as a dental surgeon, and her 31-year medical consulting business.

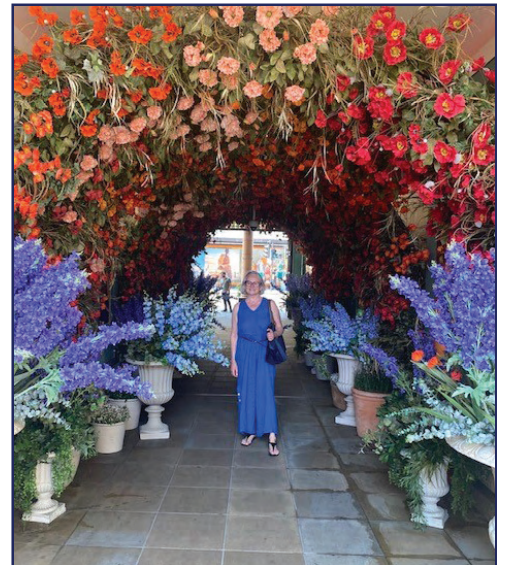
As a medical professional, Olya understood the value of specialists to help her engage meaningfully in daily life. Most importantly, she was open to change and determined not to let vision loss stop her from doing what she loves.

A low vision exam with Dr. Rachel Park revealed Olya faced a "trifecta" of vision challenges: poor central vision, low contrast sensitivity, and a restricted visual field. Standard frames offered no improvement. Fortunately, Spectrios' own trifecta—optometry, occupational therapy, and access technology—helped her achieve her goals.

Traveling is a lifelong passion for Olya, and despite a recent challenging experience with airport assistance, she's determined to continue her international adventures. To help her achieve this goal, Dr. Park prescribed a 10x monocular telescope, a handheld device that magnifies distant objects. Despite its narrow field of view, Olya was able to locate and focus on high-contrast signs 15-20 feet away in the clinic. She plans to use her monocular to navigate airports and sightsee.

Additionally, occupational therapist Katrina recommended and measured her for an identification cane—a lightweight white cane with a red tip that signifies vision impairment. This universally recognized tool will help Olya signal for assistance if needed when traveling.

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Olya's Story Continued...

Olya, like many patients at Spectrios, also identified a range of reading goals for our team. As a leisure reader, she had already transitioned to audiobooks but was promptly referred by Katrina to the Library of Congress BARD Mobile app, a national service for visually impaired readers. This expanded her access to audiobooks, enabling her to continue her voracious reading.

To achieve her goal of reading printed materials like mail and labels, Olya worked with Mark in our access technology department. She learned to use her iPhone and a portable electronic magnifier recommended by Mark, which has helped her read items at home and in the grocery store.



These successes are just a few highlights from Olya's work with our comprehensive team this year. Other achievements include expanding her glare management knowledge with Dr. Park using tinted lenses, learning tactile adaptation for home appliances with bump dots from Katrina, and working with Mark to improve her comfort with her personal iPad.

Reflecting on her journey with our "head, heart, and eyes" approach, Olya shared:

"My perspective on the world has dramatically changed... for the better! I haven't given up doing the things I love—spending time with my grandchildren, traveling with family and friends, and continuing to read voraciously through audiobooks. I've discovered podcasts and am learning so much from them every day. The tips and tools [the team at Spectrios] have given me have truly been a game-changer, helping me maintain my independence.

Life does not have to end when you lose your vision or, in my case, I have lost about 80% of my vision. Bottom line... Never. Give. Up. Life is a gift—appreciate it and enjoy each day to its max. Because I appreciate life so much more now. I'm literally living each day like it's my last.

I only focus on what I CAN do and no longer think about what I cannot do. And that makes life so much better."

We would love to help you meet your low vision rehabilitation goals and live your life to the fullest. Just like Olya. Call 630-690-7115 to make an appointment with our comprehensive team and take the first step toward renewed hope and independence!

A Day of Heart and Hope: 2024 Annual Golf Classic

On September 23, we hosted our Annual Golf Classic at Prairie Landing, where 100 dedicated golfers gathered to support our mission of improving the lives of those with vision loss. We were honored to welcome Chicago White Sox legends, including Darrin Jackson, Jim Thome, Len Casper, Gene Honda, Herm Schneider, Chris Flexen, and Mike Gellinger. Their presence added warmth and inspiration to an already special day.

A highlight of the event was hearing Angelo, one of our patients, share his powerful story. Angelo also joined us on the course, proving firsthand that vision loss doesn't mean giving up on the activities you love. His courage and determination reminded everyone of the profound impact we can make together.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our sponsors and supporters. Your generosity enables children and adults with low vision to live more independent lives and fuels programs like our "Seeing Is Believing" Children's Outreach Program, empowering K-12 students with vision loss to thrive. Thank you for making this year's event a success. We can't wait to see you next year!



Thank You 2024 Annual Golf Classic Sponsors





The Last Word: VRROOOM!!!

Off to provide hope, wisdom, sight, and joy!

I just returned from a road trip to Urbana, Charleston, and Decatur with our amazing Children's Programs Coordinator, Jen Thompson. This three-day journey took us through Central Illinois, connecting our "Seeing is Believing" mission with students who are challenged by vision loss. We traveled in our white Dodge van, newly donated by our generous donor, Bill Kay. I fondly named it the "White Knight Van" because it not only carries all our essential diagnostic equipment, prescription devices, and luggage—it brings hope and support to students in need across the state!

We enjoyed driving along roads less traveled, spending one night in Charleston and another in Mount Zion. Each day, we were able to help six students, selected by special education district teachers, with the purpose of providing hope, wisdom, sight, and joy.

The talented teachers who hosted us provided all the medical information we needed, along with valuable insights into classroom performance. The teachers, parents, and students all shared the rehabilitation challenges they hoped we could address to improve classroom experiences.



Like apprentice carpenters, these students are acquiring the tools, knowledge, and training they need to maximize all their senses and capabilities, thanks to their families, teachers, and our program. Their "toolbox" is also expanding with the latest advances in access technology—smartphones, tablets, and computers—all promoted by their teachers and our mission.

During this trip, an excited student with vision loss looked through a prescription monocular telescope for the first time and proudly shouted, "I can see your face, Mom!" Then he added, "This is perfect for the zoo, the museum, a baseball game, or a concert, Mom!" These were all activities he couldn't fully enjoy before. Another touching moment came when a bright young student, using a prescription magnifier, discovered she could see fine print and said, "Wow, now I can spot little stuff!" Her mother responded, "This is great; she likes to do things herself!"

All the students we serve have "unleashed functional potential," and we feel privileged to help bring that potential to life. Many, sadly, have limited resources and no prior low vision care. It's a rewarding experience for everyone involved, witnessing students filled with optimism, courage, and hopeful smiles. These experiences often bring a lump to the throat and tears to the eyes, tugging at the heartstrings of everyone witnessing our mission's work.

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The Last Word: “Vrrooom!” Continued...



During our time with students, we try to be like a radio dialed into their station. We have fun with the students during their low vision exams to help them relax and achieve accurate testing results. Many of these kids have experienced multiple surgeries, and for them, eye doctors may not be their first choice for a fun time, even when treatments are life-changing. This is something the late, great Grandma Martyl taught us, and it's why our program strives to create a fun, enriching, and rewarding experience for every child we serve with vision loss.

We mix things up, showing students how to use their energy to “fill the bucket of fruitfulness” rather than buckets of frustration, anger, or sadness. We work on their “heads, hearts, and eyes,” teaching them how to make the most of their sight, including ways to “see” with their ears and fingertips. We remind them of their gifts and the wonderful lives ahead of them, encouraging them never to let vision loss define who they are. We tell them to quit saying “can’t” and to remember the Little Locomotive’s words: “I think I can, I think I can!”

We work hard to squeeze every bit of vision out of these students. Most receive new prescription glasses, devices, advice on access technology applications, adaptive training, and encouragement. We improve their sight and provide plenty of hope—all FREE of charge, straight from the heart of the Spectrios Institute’s mission at the Deicke House of Hope.

For 33 years, our Seeing is Believing program has proudly served more than 10,000 students with vision loss across Illinois, earning recognition from the CDC for our impact. But perhaps the most meaningful rewards are the countless hugs we’ve received from students, families, and teachers who share in this journey. On this trip alone, we were able to reach 18 more remarkable students: Kyle, John (LJ), Brooklyn, Daxton, Quinn, Stephen, Andrew, Jac, Harper, Edith, Georgia, Angel, Lee, Reese, Destini, Brandy, Miyah, and Mia.

We’re committed to reaching as many students as possible, and we need your help to continue providing these life-changing services to families in need—at no cost to them. I’m asking for your gift today to help make this mission possible. Visit spectrios.org/donate to contribute.

For over three decades, generous support from the Lions of Illinois Foundation, Chicago White Sox and Bulls Charities, the Richard A. Perritt Charitable Foundation, and caring families like the Baylor, Behnke, Grace, Hammerschmitt, Lichtenheld, Schaffer, Setork, Smith, and Winston families has helped make all of this possible. Will you join them in helping us reach more children with the support they deserve?

Happy Holidays!

In Honor and Memory

A donation has been made in memory or honor of the following persons:
(Name in bold print, donor name in regular print)

In Memory of:

Charles R. "Charlie" Smith
Pamela Smith

In Honor of:

Dr. Tracy Williams
Suellyn Corbitt

Dr. Rachel Park
Edward Guzik

Martyl Reinsdorf
Alicia Santana

Melissa Taussig
Barbara A. Prezell

Mark Broaddus
Downmarie Domingo

Join Us in Transforming Lives: Every Gift Matters

We want to share a heartfelt story. It shows how your support can impact individuals like Rosemarie, one of our cherished patients.

Rosemarie is navigating the challenges of vision loss due to macular degeneration. Recently, she reached out to express her gratitude for the care she received at Spectrios. During her visit, she had her annual eye exam with Dr. Park. Then, she worked with Chris Retzke in our Access Technology program. Her words touched our hearts:

"I just wanted to tell you that I had an absolutely wonderful experience. Your place is the warmest, most comfortable. As I lose my vision, I feel I've found a friend. Dr. Park is outstanding—she even put batteries in my magnifying glass! And Chris, where do I begin? She's clear, she's caring, and she introduced me to wonderful tools to help with my iPad and phone. I feel like I have a place that's going to take good care of me. And you are. And I thank you."

This is why we're here: to provide warmth, care, and support every step of the way for individuals like Rosemarie. But our work is not yet done; it relies heavily on the generosity of supporters like you.

Did you know that over 60% of our funding comes from kind-hearted donors? We need your help to keep our programs affordable. Your generosity will provide life-changing services to a patient with vision loss. It will help them achieve their full potential, regardless of their financial circumstances. Can we count on your gift today? **Visit spectrios.org/donate**



35 years of serving people with vision loss!

Spectrios Institute for Low Vision
at Deicke House of Hope
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Wheaton, IL 60187
www.spectrios.org



Electronic Service Requested

Please contact our office if you have corrections to your address. Thank you!



Events & Support for Adults with Vision Loss

Nov. 13, 7pm (Zoom): Tech Support Group

Nov. 20, 7pm (Zoom): Group Chat Support Group

Dec. 6, 10:30 am (Zoom): Guest from PACE will join our Support Group to discuss ADA Paratransit Services

Dec. 9, 7pm (Geneva Library): Spectrios Presentation on Tech Resources for Individuals With Low Vision

Spectrios Institute 2025 Partners with Vision Gala set for April 26.

Mark your calendars for April 26 and join us in celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Partners with Vision Gala! Visit spectrios.org/gala for more details.



**JOIN US IN OUR MISSION
TO EMPOWER LIVES,
FOSTER INDEPENDENCE
AND IGNITE HOPE FOR
CHILDREN AND ADULTS
WITH VISION LOSS.**

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