

Breaking Tradition—Planning and Organizing a Conference on Education and Employment Opportunities

ROBERT JONES, M.ED., M.DIV.

Rev. Jones is coordinator, Continuing Education of Visually Impaired Adults (CEVIA)*, LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York.

LaGuardia Community College, 31-10 Thomson Ave., Long Island City, NY 11101

Abstract: Many diverse elements were brought together to plan and execute an unprecedented conference focused on the employment and career-planning needs of blind and visually handicapped women. This article provides a blueprint of the process from beginning to end.

A minority within a minority—blind and visually impaired women employed, underemployed or unemployed—was the focus of the cooperative venture that materialized on Saturday, November 6, 1982 in the all-day conference "Breaking Tradition: Education and Career Opportunities for Blind and Visually Impaired Women."

Planning, organizing and conducting the conference involved an exceptional degree of teamwork which saw elements of New York City's academic community operating in tandem with a number of public and voluntary agencies for visually impaired persons and a group of concerned individuals. This account of how the conference was conceived and brought to reality is designed not only to identify and acknowledge the roles played by these diverse elements, but to serve as a kind of blueprint that may prove useful if similar efforts are undertaken elsewhere.

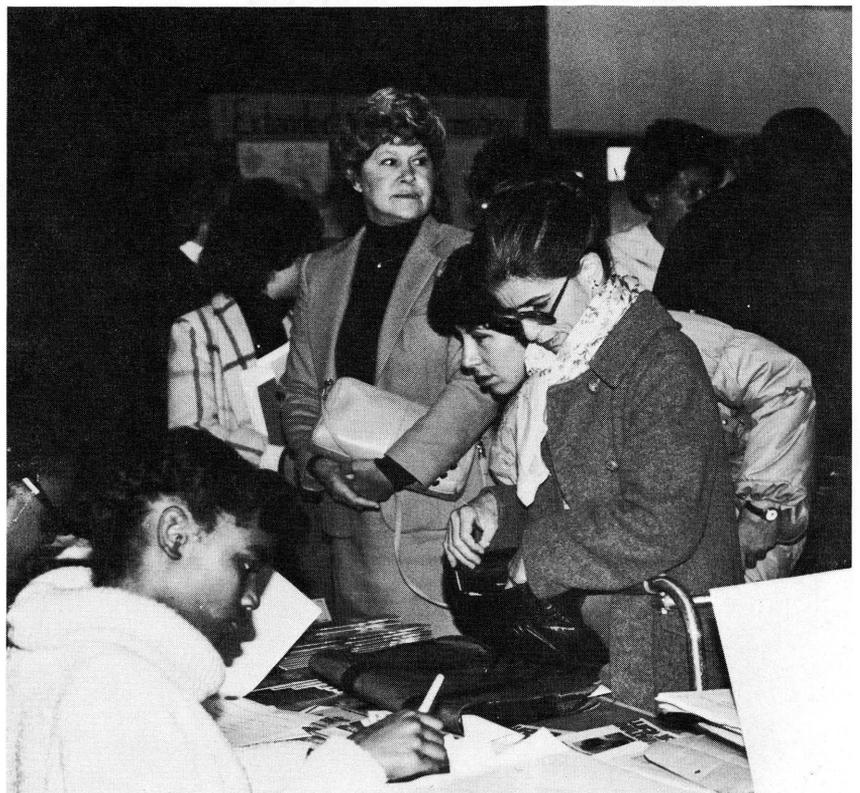
The initial impetus for the conference came from CEVIA, a consortium of the Board of Higher Education, 12 of the 18 colleges that constitute the City University of New York (CUNY), and agencies. The schools belonging to the consortium are Baruch College, Bronx Community College, Brooklyn College, City College, College of Staten Island, Hostos Community College, Lehman College, LaGuardia Community College, Manhattan Community College, Medgar Evers College, Queens College, and Queensborough

Community College. The private agencies included American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), Recording for the Blind, the New York State Commission for the Blind/Visually Handicapped, U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration, and Vacations and Community

Services for the Blind.

In mid-1982, with the state of the economy exacerbating the employment problems, informal inquiries by the writer brought offers of co-sponsorship for a conference on women and employment from AFB, which had already begun exploring issues related to women and blindness, and from the Women's Program of LaGuardia Community College. At the core of a conference advisory committee were Mary Ellen Mulholland, AFB's director of publications and information services and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*; Sandra Watson, director of LaGuardia's Women's Program; and myself in the role of CEVIA coordinator. Four other knowledgeable women accepted invitations to serve on the committee: Dr. Karen Luxton, director of the Baruch College Computer Center for the Visually Impaired; Sherrell Powell, assistant professor of occupational therapy at LaGuardia Community College; Elena Hanrahan, director of volunteers, New York Eye and Ear Hospital; and Frances A. Koestler, editor of the *Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind*.

At a series of meetings during the summer the committee worked out a theme and format for the conference, drew up a list of potential program participants, discussed the various forms of promotion and publicity that would attract atten-



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dance, and zeroed in on a host of sundry but essential details.

On the question of theme, an ERIC search revealed little specific research in visually impaired women and employment. Ann Cupolo, deputy coordinator of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund in California, confirmed the dearth of information. Thus, there were no guidelines, other than good sense based on experience, or the principal needs of the women for whom the conference would be held.

A conscious decision was made that the program participants would be invited as individuals rather than as representatives of agencies or disciplines. All but two of the 30 who eventually carried out program assignments were visually impaired or blind women.

A simple format was devised. There would be welcoming speeches by Fern Khan, professor and director of Community Service Programs at LaGuardia and Sandra Watson, and introductory comments by Dr. Luxton. The morning session would lead off with a panel of role models: Laura Gardner, telling how she created a job for herself; Deborah Kent, discussing career changing and what it entailed; Emerald McKenzie; and Karen Sandhaus, talking as a recent college graduate on her first job. The panelists would describe the limitations they had to overcome and extrapolate from those experiences concepts and suggestions that might be useful to the audience.

The conferees would then divide into small groups, each led by a moderator. A "respondent" leader would kick off the group sessions by reacting to the ideas offered by the panelists. These informal interchanges would continue at lunch where, it was hoped, some "networking" would evolve as group members interacted with others who shared similar interests.

The afternoon session would feature the four formal presentations whose texts are published in this section: Ferne K. Roberts, on "The Expansion of Educational Opportunities," Judith M. Dixon on "Attitudinal Barriers and Strategies for Overcoming Them," Eunice Fiorito on "Choices and Chances in the 80s," and Alice Fisher Rubin on "Career Trends in the 80s." A question-and-answer period, followed by 'wine & cheese,' would conclude the day.

On the whole, the agenda worked out more or less as planned. But there were inevitable changes, dictated by some last-minute unavailabilities of scheduled speakers, an influx of "walk-in" conferees who has not previously registered and—the bugaboo of every conference that has ever

been held—insufficient time at virtually every juncture.

While the conference itself was free of charge, CEVIA could not afford to defray program participants' travel and other expenses, nor could it meet all of the other costs entailed in conducting the day's events. A fee for luncheon had to be set. Consideration had to be given to the possibility that some conferees might be diabetic, or vegetarians.

Mobility was a prime consideration. Student escorts were recruited by the Women's Program, their stipends shared by the Program and CEVIA. The escorts learned the appropriate techniques for escorting blind or visually impaired people. The area's auxiliary police force was asked to provide street escort from the elevated train station on busy Queens Boulevard.

Publicity and promotion efforts were handled for the most part by AFB and the LaGuardia Community College public relations office. AFB designed an announcement and registration form for publication in the September and October issues of *JVIB*. It also provided approximately 300 mailing labels addressed to women's publications and broadcast media, and to agencies in metropolitan New York which conduct medical, recreational, rehabilitation and other service programs for blind persons. The LaGuardia public relations office wrote press releases, including some in Spanish and Chinese. The Women's Program took on recruitment of escorts who could speak Spanish or Chinese. American sign language interpreters were engaged.

AFB supplied braille paper, lent slates and styluses and prepared the large print program materials. Brailled conference materials were prepared by the Baruch College Computer Center, with AFB and CEVIA sharing the expense.

How many participants could we expect? Guesstimates ranged from a low of 70 to a high of 200. The final figure was 170 although we did not know until the very day of the conference that the 150 advanced registrations would be swelled by 20 "walk-ins." The majority came from New York City and nearby Nassau County, but we also had people from upstate New York, California, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Illinois, Georgia and New Jersey, even one from Japan.

The larger than anticipated attendance created a space problem. Our original plan had been to have discussion groups of 12 to 15 people each. Another college meeting limited the number of rooms available to us, so in the end we had to settle for four groups of about 25 persons each. The moderators were Adrienne Asch, Kay McDon-

ald, Emerald McKenzie and Pam Schneider. Discussion "respondents" were Jamie Casabianca, Karen Eisenstat, Jane Thomas, Jill Ferst, Sue Harden and Sherrell Powell.

Assignment of conferees to the groups was based on self-identified categories derived from the registration forms. Each group was salted with people from various categories: employed, unemployed, housewives, students (college and high school), and participant/observers. Deaf women or those who were Spanish-or Chinese-speaking were carefully placed. Participation by males was restricted: the 15 men who attended represented agencies or specific professional disciplines.

Cooperative endeavor took care of many of the other details. AFB assigned staff members—Corinne Kirchner, Colleen Davis, Margaret King, Jackie Packer and Robin Tannenbaum—to serve as recorders for the group session. Special arrangements were made to accommodate the needs of the dog guides that accompanied about 35 of the women. Last-minute housing was arranged for out-of-town program participants by the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind. A nearly life-sized terra cotta sculpture, *A Seated Woman*, was installed in the lobby by New York artist Margo Krasne.

The major national follow up planned was publication of this special section of *JVIB*. There may well be by-products in the form of similar conferences in other cities. Inquiries have been received from agencies on the West Coast, in the Southeast, in upstate New York, Israel, and Australia.

Locally, steps have been initiated by CEVIA to increase accessibility to CUNY programs for visually impaired adults. One outreach effort was a special mailing on educational opportunities at CUNY, produced in collaboration with Recording for the Blind and sent to its subscribers in New York City. Meetings have been held with teachers in the New York Board of Education and the regional Veterans Association. Special pilot courses on integrating visually impaired students with sighted students have been given for adjunct staff teaching classes in Adult Basic Education and English As a Second Language. LaGuardia Community College gave an on-campus course on Resources for the Newly Blind, based on the model established by the Vision Foundation in Massachusetts. Continued collaboration with LaGuardia's Women's Program is planned.

Out of what proved to be a memorably worthwhile enterprise come these few nuggets of afterthought that may prove of value to those contemplating events of a similar nature:

- Tackle it only with strong support staff

capable of detailed follow-through work. This will insure, among other things, that coffee is delivered to the right location!

- Registration invariably takes longer than anticipated. Movements of crowds of people is a problem requiring special attention.

- Interesting topics discussed by interested people eat up time, whether on the audience floor or at the speaker's platform, in the corridors or over coffee.

- Be prepared for the unexpected: e.g., speakers delayed by wayfaring taxis, un-typed thank-you notes, locked rooms, inoperable microphones, angry or tearful leaders or participants, and so on down the line.

- Once the agenda is planned, un-plan it! Circumstances will conspire to do so anyway. Stay flexible.

- Relax and enjoy it.

Perhaps the most telling final word on

our conference was the comment in a letter received from a participant. "This workshop didn't provide all the answers, but it gave us a focus and a starting point." To which I can only add the hope that this was so, and express heartfelt thanks to all whose joint efforts made at least a beginning dent in the traditional barriers that have kept blind and visually impaired women from their rightful place in the world of work.

Visually Impaired Women and the World of Work: Theme and Variations

FRANCES A. KOESTLER

Ms. Koestler is editor, *Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind*.

Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind, 20 W. 17th St., New York, NY 10011

Abstract: This summary of the proceedings at the conference on "Education and Employment Opportunities for Blind and Visually Impaired Women" lists the major factors identified as roadblocks to satisfactory career development and points to a variety of coping strategies that can help overcome the dual handicap of gender and disability.

Underscoring and counterpointing a dominant theme—that the combination of gender and disability subjects visually impaired women to double-barreled discrimination—the women and girls (their ages ranged from 15 to 64) who attended the conference focused on internal and external coping strategies relative to jobs and careers.

Speaker after speaker, and in their own informal group discussions, the conferees heard confirmations of what they themselves had always known or suspected to be among the causes of their plight:

- Almost from birth, visually impaired females are brought up by overprotective parents to be passive, sheltered, and dependent on others for decisions. In many instances, such traits are reinforced by teachers, school guidance counselors, rehabilitation workers, and, most damaging of all, by the women's own self-image.

- Given such an upbringing, self-knowledge is hard to come by. Timidity and fear of failure keep visually impaired

women from exploring potential avenues of experience, yet failure is one of the most valuable of teachers.

- By leaving decision-making to others, visually impaired women find themselves at the mercy of stereotyped attitudes that inhibit their right to pursue valid personal goals. Lacking training in assertive behavior, they tend to accept what is offered to them because they do not know how to make their wishes known or respected.

- The "blindness system" is not adequately geared to embrace the wider world of employment. Vocational rehabilitation counselors have narrow concepts of what visually impaired persons are capable of doing, especially in professional or managerial areas; their placement practices tend to focus on the low-risk, low-pay end of the job market.

- The disability insurance system invokes built-in disincentives that make it easier, and often financially more advantageous, to live on grants than to accept low-paying employment.

Given the foregoing realities, what remedies need to be sought?

First and foremost, it was universally stressed, is proper preparation in the form of sound educational background, competence in basic skills (reading, writing, typing, information gathering, mobility), and familiarity with visual or other technological aids that can add to efficient performance. To the objection that typing skills may automatically assign a woman to a clerical slot, it was pointed out that the increasing prevalence of computer usage is making knowledge of the keyboard a prerequisite for all kinds of tasks, professional and executive as well as secretarial.

Self-knowledge Essential

Self-knowledge is another essential for successful pursuit of a career. If, for example, a woman's strength is in working with people rather than with paper, any attempt to force her into a field that entails heavy clerical, statistical, or writing components should be resisted. Career decisions are the prerogative of the individual.

Work experience of any kind is a valuable asset. Summer jobs, part-time jobs, and volunteer service not only build confidence and hone skills, but have a cumulative effect in persuading prospective employers of a woman's versatility and capacity to perform in a variety of settings. Some companies offer unpaid apprenticeships or internships in professional fields. These are worth pursuing.

Colleges with work-study programs and efficient placement offices should be sought out. Another consideration in choosing a college is whether or not it provides specialized services for handicapped students.

A study of business trends can point the way to job opportunities. For the present, elementary school teaching positions are apt to be in short supply, thanks to the low birth rates of recent decades; on the other hand, health care services are expanding because of the steady increase in the elderly population. Career planning should take a long-range view.