



**JOSIE KANTNER: COMPOSING A LIFE WITH VISION LOSS**

If you have connected with our organization in any form over the last twenty years, you have most likely been welcomed, advised, or consoled by the current heart of the Sight-Loss Support Group, Josie Kantner. Joining the SLSG as a member after moving to State College from Bedford, PA, by 2002 she was elected to the Board of Director, hired as Programs Director in 2008, and was appointed as Director of the Sight-Loss Support Group in 2013 upon the retirement of founder Rana Arnold. With determination, knowledge, and a drive to support others, Josie helped the Sight-Loss Support Group transition to a new kind of organization. With the help of loyal board members and volunteers, the organization moved from a “brick and mortar” organization to a “virtual” office in 2015. This change allowed the group to focus its financial resources more directly on programs: providing emotional and peer support, access to the arts and local events, and offering a gateway to regional vision rehabilitation services.

Legally blind since her late thirties from retinitis pigmentosa, Josie’s vision has declined gradually throughout her lifetime. In a quote from an interview with the Center Daily Times, Josie says:

“Having a vision problem myself, I think it would be hard to do this kind of work if you couldn’t relate personally to what people are going through. It’s this personal experience with losing one’s vision that motivates me and gets me out bed in the morning. If we can help people be more hopeful and optimistic and encourage them to realize that there is a lot of possibility out there living with sight, then I’ve made the world a slightly better place.”

But Ms. Kantner is more than a caring, understanding friend. In 2022, she earned an M.Ed. in Counselor Education from Penn State. This degree, along with her M.A. in Anthropology from George Washington University and B.A. in Humanities from Johns Hopkins University, gave her the professional tools and credentials to back up her kindness and wisdom. In her current position as outreach specialist for our virtual organization, Josie is the SLSG’s primary phone and email connection, our liaison to local, state, and federal agencies, coordinator of the monthly lunch support group meetings, newsletter editor, and promoter of View Via Voice’s audiodescription events. Aside from bringing people with vision loss together to find common ground, Josie’s mission is to help clients open the door to vision rehabilitation services that put people on a path toward hope and greater independence.

“We have more and more people who are becoming visually impaired, and the vast majority of them either don’t know about vision rehabilitation services or are choosing not to use it, so I think outreach is really important. And I’m trying to collaborate more than we have in the past with other agencies in the area.” Living with vision loss can be overwhelming, especially at onset. The SightLoss Support Group is here to support individuals at the beginning and throughout the inevitable changes and challenges in the years ahead. Our mission statement says “We offer a supportive atmosphere where individuals can adjust to loss of vision, learn what resources are available for assistance and develop strategies to regain independence. Through shared experiences and a positive approach, the SLSG helps people answer the question, “What do I do now?”

Although Covid risks have made everything more challenging, we are still very much here. Remember that our organization and an understanding friend are always a mere phone call away. Currently, while the Covid risk is limited, you can connect in person with Josie at our 2nd Thursdays lunch group. There you will find a supportive group of people who are learning to live with sight loss and representatives from the blindness organizations in the region. And we mustn’t forget lunch –yes there is such a thing as free lunch. Josie’s smile will most likely be the first one you see and she will probably be serving your meal, which she may have contributed to herself. A representative from our View Via Voices audio-description program also attends the meeting and keeps us up to date on upcoming events on campus and in the community. Josie will often be in the audience, headset on, waiting for the curtain to rise. Vision loss can be hard, but it also has its rewards, opening us up to new challenges and experiences.

Quotes are from a 2013 CDT article, Q&A with Josie Smith, Director of the Sight-Loss Support Group of Central PA by Mike Dawson