



The Sight-Loss Support Group of Central Pennsylvania, Inc.

Turning Darkness into Light Since 1982

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THE OUTLOOK Newsletter

June 2020

SLSG PROGRAMS TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED DUE TO CORONAVIRUS

2nd Thursdays, our monthly support group meeting, and all View Via Voice audio-description events are suspended temporarily due to the Coronavirus. Over the summer, the Sight-Loss Support Group Board of Directors will evaluate the impact of the virus on our community and how we can safely resume our programs. Please check our website, www.slsg.org, or call Josie Kantner at 238-0132 for updated information.

We will be separated for this time, but we are connected through a special bond – the support we give one another as we adjust to living with sight loss. May we go forward with a clear head, a resilient spirit, and an open heart as we navigate these uncertain times.

REMEMBERING RANA MCMURRAY ARNOLD

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of our vivacious, beloved co-founder and friend, Rana McMurray Arnold, on May 28, 2020. In 1982 Rana co-founded the Sight-Loss Support Group of Central PA and served as its executive director until her retirement in 2013. We are devoting this newsletter to remembrances of Rana, who truly turned darkness into light for us all. Her spirit will forever remain in our hearts and in our organization.

Please visit the SLSG website, www.slsg.org, for a lovely tribute to Rana written by SLSG Board member and webmaster, Eileen Rivoir. There are a few memorable photos of Rana there as well. If you would like to write a tribute to Rana, please visit the Koch Funeral Home website, www.kochfuneralhome.com.

A LETTER FROM SLSG BOARD PRESIDENT, WILLIAM R. MUZZY

We are mourning the loss of our dear founder and friend, Rana Arnold. Rana started the Sight-Loss Support Group with Dr. Fred Carlin in 1982 because she realized that people in the region needed more services to overcome their struggles with sight loss. For thirty-one years she created new programs to that end: the Centre County 4-H Seeing Eye Puppy Raisers program that raised puppies for the Seeing Eye Inc. (the oldest guide dog school in the world serving the visually impaired); Audio Description to share the performing arts, museums, and gardens with the blind; Festival Eyes to escort the visually impaired through our local arts festivals; and monthly support group meetings for SLSG members. Rana worked with the Borough of State College to upgrade street crossings, including "talking" crosswalks in downtown State College. She welcomed newly sight-impaired people at the office and helped them connect with resources and training appropriate to their needs. She created occluders and other devices that sighted people could use to help them experience sight impairment. The list goes on, but it is safe to say she was busy giving rather than taking.

She was a warm, loving, sensitive, smart, energetic, engaging woman. She had a tremendous sense of humor. She did not take herself too seriously and always appreciated others. We will miss her. The SLSG Board is currently exploring ways of memorializing Rana in the community she served for over 30 years.

Rana's legacy continues. In 2015 the SLSG gave up its "bricks and mortar" office. Due to the high cost of maintaining an office with employees, we were spending too much time on fundraising. Taking advantage of technology, we started a virtual office with volunteers. We have one paid contractor who coordinates meetings, outreach activities, writes needed materials, and provides counseling for those in need. The SLSG hosts a monthly support group luncheon at Mt. Nittany Residences, a joint effort with the other organizations that serve the visually impaired in our region, North Central Sight Services and the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services. Staff members from each organization attend the monthly meetings and attendees have informal access to them.

The VIPs (Visually Impaired Persons) who attend the meetings come from State College, Bellefonte, Centre Hall, and other communities in Centre County. We provide the food and attendance is particularly good even when the weather is not. Each month we have either a special presentation or an informal discussion. Volunteers help with serving and cleanup.

Our audio-description program, View Via Voice, continues, although it is currently hampered by the coronavirus epidemic. Describers are working on individual and

group training and making plans to expand outside the immediate region. Our audio describers also guide VIPs through the local arts festivals. And the Puppy Raisers continue to raise future seeing-eye dogs.

REMEMBRANCES

Nanette Anslinger, Former SLSG Audio Describer and Board Member

I met vivacious, knowledgeable, empathetic Rana Arnold in 1995 at a Pennsylvania Art Education Association convention in Scranton. Her advertised presentation had to do with blind and vision-impaired patrons “seeing art”. Fascinated by the subject and, subsequently, enthralled by her lecture, I wanted to talk to her afterwards, but the surge of inquirers prevented that.

It was only later, in the hallway, when I tripped over her guide dog, that I realized she was blind! Her persona never gave that clue because she looked at the audience, and then me, directly in the eye when she spoke. I’d never had an experience like that – or such an awakening. When I returned home, I contacted the Sight- Loss Support Group which she’d talked of starting in 1982, and immediately became a member. I’ve been constantly learning ever since.

Rana’s ability to inspire and educate people about the lack of limitations for those with blindness and low vision was unmatched. She spawned new ideas about reachable experiences for them, especially in the visual and dramatic arts.

She shared that she’d wanted to study drama in college but was refused. Then art - and was refused. But she persisted and graduated with a degree in English. Perhaps that’s why she became such a loquacious advocate for her peers.

I attended workshops to learn the subtleties of “guided touch” and became a Festival Eyes Guide. Then Rana and Ermyn King arranged for a workshop to train people to “audio describe”, particularly, of live theatrical performances. I auditioned, was accepted, and learned more in those three days than I ever did in a semester college course. It was the first establishment of an audio-description program in the state of Pennsylvania and we then conducted training workshops in Pittsburgh, Lancaster, and Philadelphia to help theatres establish their own programs. I worked at audio describing for 20 years and participated in all other aspects of the SLSG’s work. I couldn’t get enough.

She was the queen of gathering blind people to come to the SLSG for help, and constantly invented new ways to do that. Besides Summer Arts Fest, galleries, museums, historic houses, gardens, and visits to artists’ private homes to explore art by touch, she helped arrange a vast art exhibit at St. Andrew’s

Episcopal Church in Stage College. There we displayed, not only art contributed by students from a Florida high school, but also “Living Portraits” which replicated famous paintings by costumed actors. Blind visitors were guided to “explore by touch” the students’ work and the life-sized frames, clothing, furnishings, and props in the “paintings”. These were then taken on the road to gatherings of various art organizations throughout the state. A demonstration of that work was even given at an International Museum Theatre Association conference in Australia in 2005.

Every time I was with Rana, I learned something new. For instance, when I drove her to Boal Barn’s performances, she’d say firmly, “Turn right here”. I had no idea how, even after all those years of being with her, she knew the landscape she couldn’t see.

She relished her summer picnics at her home, opening it up to 30-40 people who brought food and drinks. But she was the one who greeted people, guided everyone around her kitchen, through the dining room and onto the patio. After all those years, it was still mind-boggling to see her at work domestically.

When she retired as executive director from the SLSG, she finally had time to explore her original passion – creating art for herself. And she painted nonstop – wild, wonderfully colorful abstracts on both white and black backgrounds.

Rana has been a gift in my life - second only to that of my parents. Her heritage lives on through all of us, through the learners she inspired to work, and through the thousands of blind and vision-impaired people whose lives she touched. Rest in peace, dear Rana.

Phyllis Santoro, Former SLSG Office Manager

I worked with Rana for 18 years at the Sight-Loss Support Group office. During those years we had ups and downs (two bossy women working together, what would you expect?). But, in reality, those years were some of the happiest years of my life. I watched Rana work with visitors in the office and heard her speak to individuals on the phone more times than I can count. I don’t think there was a time when these people didn’t end up feeling better. Rana managed to calm them, show them what was available to help them and put them in touch with other agencies that could do what we could not. I really believe that Rana was meant to do this work and she did it well. As for myself, the SLSG enriched my life and broadened my world view. The job allowed me to meet and become lifelong friends with people I wouldn’t have met otherwise. I will always be grateful to Rana and the SLSG for giving me this wonderful opportunity.

I'd like to extend my sincere condolences to Rana's sons and all of the family and friends who knew and loved her.

Helen Manful, Former SLSG Audio Describer

Our beautiful, wonderful, positive Rana is gone. And yet with all of her medical problems she was always hopeful and upbeat. It was always going to get better, until it didn't. I don't really remember when I met Rana. I remember a sun visor on her French-twisted golden hair. As time went on, the hair became red but the positive energy always remained. I wanted to know this woman who walked so beautifully with her dog. And I learned that she loved the theatre. I did a production of OUR TOWN in the Pavilion Theater, and Rana was in the first row with her dog settled at her feet--- until the chickens, taped of course, began to croak. Rana's dog was on her feet barking and the audience laughed. But Rana easily settled her dog. Recently she spent three years trying to find the perfect canine companion, and she finally did. Her name was Audrey; she was beautiful and Rana loved her. I never dreamed it was to be such a short romance. My friend, Phil Keeney and I visited her several times when she was in the rehab hospital. She did her exercises religiously, determined to get well. She had confidence in her doctors and in her will to recover. And she always did recover.

She loved her handsome husband Steve and helped him as he yielded to diabetes. She told me once how they met. At Knox College he was Rana's reader/tutor who read printed lessons to his beautiful student. Her sons, Chris and Tim, both had I believe happy childhoods. From birth, when Rana's mother realized that her beautiful premature baby was blind, her determination to give that baby a normal life was powerful. We read in notes from Chris and Tim that Rana wished to be buried next to her mother. It was her mother, who wanted her to dance and be educated, who was to a degree responsible for Rana's constantly positive attitude toward life.

No wonder I wanted to get to know this elegant, funny, capable human being. I remember how fast her mind functioned. We were at a swimming pool and Rana wanted me to join her in leading the hula-hula dance. Rana was way ahead of me, and I simply didn't know what I was doing as Rana moved her hips and pushed her bewildered assistant forward.

I was an audio describer for a time. Nanette and I did the very first one in the Playhouse Theatre. I was always sad when the describers stopped working in the School of Theatre. I loved it but I was never very good at it and when we were placed in the highest place in that vast Eisenhower Auditorium I was bewildered. One night, while describing a mystery, I confused a fireplace and a window. So

much for describing! And the current describers should be applauded for their excellent work. It pleased Rana so much.

I had the pleasure of being Rana's neighbor. We were just gearing up to go walking with Audrey when I got the first note of the stroke from Chris and Tim. People who worked with Rana adored her but could never quite keep up with her. And I believe the thing I loved the most in Rana was her joy in everything she did, her constant determination to get well, to believe in the future, to enjoy her garden, her painting, her home, music, her family. She loved life and when I get blue or down, I think of her kindness, her joy in life, her humor, her talent. I have a beautiful angel she gave us for the top of our Christmas tree. Rana will always live in my heart as a gift of just how beautiful and strong a life can be.

Bill Muzzy, SLSG Board President

On one memorable occasion, I was helping Rana with her computer, the kind that talks to you, but I had trouble understanding its voice. Rana had used it for years and easily understood it. So, there we were, she translating what it said and I typing her response: it was a perfect case of the blind leading the deaf!

Another good memory was when I drove Rana and Bingo to the Seeing Eye in New Jersey for Bingo's checkup. She always had Bingo lie at her feet in the car. It was a long drive and I couldn't fathom them being so cramped for such a long time, so I convinced Rana to let Bingo stretch out on the back seat. I swear that dog smiled all the way there and back.

Eileen H. Rivoir, SLSG Board Member

One of Rana's greatest talents was her ability to use her infectious enthusiasm and energy to coax everyone, regardless of their confidence, ability, or drive, to try a little harder, stretch a little further. I walked into the Sowers Street office in 2004 with detached retinas, and years later emerged as an audio-describing, fund-raising, event-planning, puppy-raising board member. It took me years to realize that the benefactor of these enlistments was me. Rana instinctively saw what each of us needed, and under the pretense of "I was hoping you would do me a favor" put the right people together and gave us an opportunity to stretch our wings. Whether you saw 20/20 or were totally blind was never a factor.

Puppy raising wasn't a hard sell. How could anyone who tried to keep up with Rana and Smitty or Bingo not be inspired? Monthly 4-H Puppy Meetings at the Ag Arena at PSU included an assortment of raisers that ranged from families with pre-schoolers, inspiring teens with a mom or dad, and a few retired oldsters (like me and Bob). It was actually at those meetings that I found Rana to be the most

subdued and serious. The Seeing Eye was her passion; her golden retriever angels changed her life, and she inspired us with how she and her dog tackled life as one unit, and reminded us of the important task we had undertaken. In public, Rana and her golden retrievers were vibrant ambassadors for all disabilities. People may not have known her name, but almost everyone in State College knew the effervescent, red-haired lady with the dog.

My favorite moments with Rana were as a guide at the Arts Festivals, another passion of hers. Not only could she direct me through the crowds easier than I could manage solo, I never “saw” so much at each artist’s booth as when she would point out details that I was the one blind to. Her motto was bringing darkness to light, and that light will never be dimmed.

Louise Victor, View Via Voice, Audio Describers’ Coordinator

I first met Rana at a meeting in the mid-1980’s. The club that I belonged to was interviewing people to determine who would receive the funds from our major fundraiser for that year. The Sight-Loss Support Group was one of the finalists. Rana was smartly dressed in a bright outfit with coordinating accessories. She spoke so well, was knowledgeable, poised, and obviously passionate about the Sight-Loss Support Group and their mission in the community.

Little did I know that years later, in 2017, our paths would cross again when I volunteered to be an Audio Describer. After every show that I described, Rana would always comment and thank the people who described. She was always dressed in bright colors and just made you smile when you saw her. She loved walking the Penn State Arboretum tours with the Audio Describers and Master Gardeners. I always learned so much from talking to her and tried to do so every chance I got. She was a gracious person and a true inspiration to many people.

Roger Gaumont, SLSG Board Secretary

I met Rana in 1987 when I was appointed State College Rotary Club’s liaison to the Sight-Loss Support Group (SLSG). The Group’s major fundraiser at that time was an annual Swim for Sight. Rana, and other swimmers, both normally sighted and visually impaired, solicited per-lap pledges, and swam those laps in a day-long group event. One of my jobs was to count laps and make sure visually impaired swimmers knew they were approaching a turn. One year, Rana was walking around the pool without a guide-dog, organizing swimmers, snack tables, volunteers and lap tally sheets, while avoiding obstacles, including the pool itself. When I asked how she did this, she showed me the hand-held sonic-cane she was using to navigate. One of the SLSG’s missions was to spread knowledge of aids for the visually impaired, and no one did this better than Rana, by in-person

demonstration, by keeping a supply of devices at the SLSG office, and through speakers at SLSG meetings.

At an annual meeting of the SLSG one year, the after-dinner speaker failed to show up. Rana got to her feet and announced that since there was no speaker, the entertainment would consist of everyone telling one "blind joke". The stories turned out to be very funny, making it evident that a good sense of humor helps when coping with the frustrations of visual impairment.

Cindy Shaler, SLSG Audio Describer

A grande dame, charming and full of fun even when she was hurting. Rana cared about others so much and has left a legacy that reflects her caring perfectly - the SLSG. A lover of art, theater, dogs, and above all people, she brought joy and peace to many in our area who were struggling with sight loss, turning their lives around. Her generosity was infectious!

Josie Kantner, SLSG Board Member and Former Executive Director

It was my good fortune to meet Rana in the fall of 1998 when I first moved to State College. Just beginning a graduate program in counseling at Penn State, I had two young children in tow, was newly divorced, and didn't know a soul. Somehow Rana knew I was in town. The sight loss community, small and tightknit, is an efficient grapevine. We had our first meeting at her office shortly after I arrived. And so, we began a 22-year relationship where I was an SLSG member, Board member, and finally, executive director when Rana retired in 2013.

Meeting Rana was just what I needed; a breath of fresh air, a vivacious woman who embraced life and took it where *she* wanted to go. She took her sight loss, wrapped it in a beautiful, vibrant bow and transformed a "limitation" into the defining force of her life. She brought me and so many others along with her. She introduced me to a community that enriched my life – lasting friendships, an opportunity for professional growth, and a deep dive into the performing arts and cultural events of our small town. I cannot imagine my life in State College without Rana and the Sight-Loss Support Group.

I remember my first SLSG annual potluck dinner at the Friends Meeting House. (In the early years this over-booked grad student and single mother only showed up at SLSG meetings when they fed me.) How Rana shined that night. She lit up the room; a beautifully dressed free spirit, captivating her audience with her off-the-cuff humor and warmth. How everyone loved her. She went out of her way to draw me in, making me feel special and most welcome. She had a gift for being with people.

For decades, Rana was the face of sight loss in our community. She was the beautiful lady with the beautiful dog who walked with grace and confidence across town and campus. This was a different face of sight loss. We found her to be remarkable and indeed she was. Thanks to her mother, Rana grew up in an expansive, nurturing world with no place for the limiting stereotypes of blindness. (I too was blessed with a similar childhood.) Yes, she had retinopathy of prematurity and significant low vision. But without question, Rana would have a full life and pursue her interests in theater and art, despite the lack of support she encountered in college. There was no keeping this good woman down. Rana, a life-long ambassador for the visually impaired, had a presence that challenged our stereotypical views of blindness and she did so without uttering a word.

So, what did I learn from this beautiful woman with the beautiful dog? Rana personified what has taken me years to realize. We *are* the stories we tell ourselves. These narratives we spin for ourselves can bring us to a place of resilience and possibility or lead us down a darker path. Leading by example, Rana coaxed us along, helping me and so many others get to the “other side” of blindness and sight loss.

And what of her legacy? She shepherded the newly blind through a maze of services that led to recovery, created programs that brought the arts back into people’s lives, and helped 4-H families raise those adorable puppies that one day would be a blind person’s loyal companion. These were her passions. All this came from a well-spring that fed her life. In the words of Joseph Campbell, my favorite scholar of world mythology, Rana “followed her bliss.”

Yes, Rana was an inspiring role model for the visually impaired. But for me, Rana’s most enduring gift was this - she led from the heart. Whether one is blind, fully sighted, or somewhere in between, in her bird of paradise way, Rana showed us how to live. Rather than allowing life to hold her back, she pursued her passions and made the world a better place. And all of us who fell within her orb are the better for it.

The beautiful lady with the beautiful dog gave me a gift. She gave me friendship, a place to belong, and converted me into a sun worshipper. “When the shadows come, turn your face to the sun.” She would have made Helen Keller proud. Rana really did turn darkness into light.



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Our programs are temporarily suspended due to the Coronavirus. Please check our website (www.sls.org) for announcements, updates, and further information. You can also follow “Sight-Loss Support of Central PA Inc” on Facebook.

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