



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

Turning Darkness into Light Since 1982

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THE OUTLOOK Newsletter Fall 2021

WELCOME BACK!

What a long, strange journey it's been. We're not out of the pandemic woods yet but we can see the edge of the forest. After an 18-month hiatus, the Sight-Loss Support Group decided to resume its programs. We were delighted to hold the 2nd Thursdays support group meeting in October at Mt Nittany Residences. This was a joint decision of the regular attendees of the meeting and the three organizations that sponsor 2nd Thursdays: Sight-Loss Support Group, North Central Sight Services, and the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services.

The October meeting was special; we relished the conversation as never before and feasted on shrimp alfredo and pecan crusted chicken. There was a special presentation by Penn State art professor, Bonnie Collura, and several of her students. A description of her new project, "Together, Tacit" is below.

Our audio description program, View Via Voice, is also back! This fall we are describing two plays produced by the Penn State School of Theater. Please see the information below for details.

PLEASE NOTE: The 2nd Thursdays meeting in November is on November 18th which is the 3rd Thursday of the month. We have never changed weeks before but decided not to hold the meeting on Veterans Day. Please join us on December 9th for our annual Christmas party. See the end of the newsletter for a listing of activities in November and December.

FALL AUDIO-DESCRIBED PERFORMANCES

We are excited to be Audio Describing live theater events again! After many years, we are thrilled to once again be audio describing Penn State Centre Stage School of Theatre productions at the Playhouse and the Pavilion theatres. We will continue to describe shows at Eisenhower Auditorium starting with the Winter and Spring theater season.

Tickets are free for both Penn State School of Theater performances and Penn State Center for the Performing Arts performances. Please call Josie Kantner at 814-238-0132 to reserve your tickets or for additional information.

PLEASE NOTE: Reservations for tickets and the audio-description service are required at least two weeks in advance of the performance(s). The free tickets are for the audio-described performances only, which are listed below.

The Wild Party (Musical)

November 5, 7:30 pm, Playhouse Theatre (Opening Night)

November 6, 2:00 pm matinee, Playhouse Theatre

Book, Music, and Lyrics: Andrew Lippa

Adapted from a book-length poem written in and about the Roaring Twenties, The Wild Party tells the story of one wild evening in the Manhattan apartment shared by Queenie and Burrs, a vaudeville dancer and a vaudeville clown. In a relationship marked by vicious behavior and recklessness (mirroring the time in which they live), they decide to throw a party to end all parties. As the guests arrive, we meet an assortment of people living on the edge. Queenie and Burrs set out to make each other jealous, but Queenie begins to fall in love with her conquest named Mr. Black. After a long night of decadence, Burrs' jealousy erupts, and he comes to a violent end at Mr. Black's hand. In the stark light of a new day, Queenie moves out into a brighter world, although not necessarily a brighter future, leaving the passed-out revelers in her wake. An award-winning score by Andrew Lippa provides excitement and drive for this tale of passions out of control. Capturing the sound of a bygone era with

a nod to the present one, he makes us realize that moral decadence is not limited to our past. <https://andrewlipa.com/the-wild-party/>

A Midsummer Night's Dream

December 3, 7:30 pm, Pavilion Theatre (Opening Night)

December 4, 2:00 pm matinee, Pavilion Theatre

By William Shakespeare

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy written by William Shakespeare, circa 1595, 1596. The play is set in Athens and consists of several subplots that revolve around the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. One subplot involves a conflict among four Athenian lovers. Another follows a group of six amateur actors rehearsing the play which they are to perform before the wedding. Both groups find themselves in a forest inhabited by fairies who manipulate the humans and are engaged in their own domestic intrigue. The play is one of Shakespeare's most popular and is widely performed. (Wikipedia)

The Fall 2021 season at the Center for the Performing Arts (CPA) at Eisenhower Auditorium is not being audio described. Stay informed on audio-described performances in the Winter/Spring 2021/2022 season at the CPA through the Sight-Loss Support Group newsletter, website (www.slsq.org) and Facebook page. To reserve tickets and the audio-description service, View Via Voice, phone 814-238-0132. And remember, RESERVATIONS ARE REQUIRED AT LEAST TWO WEEKS IN ADVANCE OF THE PERFORMANCE.

“TOGETHER, TACIT”, CREATING ART THRU THE EYES OF THE BLIND; AN INNOVATIVE ART PROJECT AT PENN STATE

It's an age-old question – how do the blind see? How do blind and partially sighted people imagine and experience the world around them? Professor Bonnie Collura, art professor in the Penn State School of Visual Arts, takes on this question through the lens of art. She is exploring how people with significant visual impairment experience, imagine, and create art in her new project “Together, Tacit.” Professor Collura is looking for visually impaired volunteers to be a part of the

project. If you would like more information or wish to volunteer, please contact the Sight-Loss Support Group at 814-238-0132 or office@slsg.org.

The project is a collaboration between visually impaired individuals and sighted art students who will co-create works of art. The first step in this creative process focuses on the visually impaired person (VIP) imagining what a sculptural form might look like and creating a virtual reality blueprint. Then, the VIP and a sighted art student begin their collaborative work, translating the VIP's imaginary blueprint into an actual sculptural form. Through mutual negotiation and communication, the collaborators create a sculpture that neither party, the sighted or the VIP, could have built without the other.

Professor Collura's idea for "Together, Tacit" was sparked in May 2018 when she participated in a tour at Penn State's Palmer Museum of Art with the Sight-Loss Support Group. She had two pieces of sculpture in the exhibition, "Plastic Entanglements: Ecology, Aesthetics, Materials." Guiding the hands of several VIPs as they explored her sculptures proved to be a profound experience for her. It made her wonder how visually impaired individuals "shape space" within their eyes and minds. Her participation with these museum visitors was the inspiration for her current project where art students and VIPs work together to build sculptures inspired by how blind and partially sighted people "see."

The first phase of the project is a collaboration between students from the Penn State College of Engineering and several VIPs. Together, they design a glove embedded with sensors that enables the VIP to sculpt in space. The sensors in the glove track the VIP's body movements that are translations of what the VIP imagines a sculptural form might look like. This process creates a blueprint in a virtual reality space that guides the sculpture making process as the VIP and fine arts student begin building form together.

The endgame of "Together, Tacit" is for visually impaired people working with sighted collaborators, to create works of art for display and interaction. This creative process will take place in a workshop hosted by the Penn State School of Visual Arts on the University Park campus.

The sculptures created in this unique and innovative setting will be exhibited publicly in a university or local gallery.

VOLUNTEERS IN LANDMARK GENE-EDITING EXPERIMENT REGAIN SOME VISION

Michael Kalberer can see colors again – his first glimpse of a sunset in many, many years was a great moment. And when he danced at his cousin’s wedding, he could see the DJ’s strobe lights change color. Carlene Knight’s vision is brighter and more vivid, colors are brilliant again, and rather than blindly feeling for objects, she can now simply look for them.

Michael Kalberer and Carlene Knight are two of seven patients with a rare eye disease who volunteered to let doctors modify their DNA by injecting the revolutionary gene-editing tool CRISPR directly into their retinal cells. The experiment is a joint venture of the Casey Eye Institute at the Oregon Health and Science University and the Ocular Genomics Institute at Massachusetts Eye and Ear, the teaching hospital of Harvard Ophthalmology. Dr. Mark Pennesi, professor of ophthalmology at the Casey Eye Institute, presented the results at the 2021 International Symposium on Retinal Degeneration in Nashville, TN. The approach appears to be working, improving the vision of at least some patients with Leber congenital amaurosis (LCA), a severe form of retinal degeneration. LCA is caused by a genetic mutation that disables crucial cells in the retina. Patients experience a progressive loss of vision starting at birth that usually renders them legally blind.

“It’s a really amazing technology and very powerful” says Dr. Pennesi. He cautions that more patients need to be treated and followed longer to confirm that the approach is safe and determine just how much it can help patients. But the current results are so promising that the researchers have gotten the go-ahead to move on to the next group of patients.

CRISPR is showing promise for treating blood disorders such as sickle cell disease and cancer. These experiments involve taking cells out of the body, editing them in the lab, and then infusing them back into the patients. That's impossible for diseases like LCA because cells from the retina can't be removed and then put back into the eye.

The doctors involved in the study modified a harmless virus to ferry the CRISPR gene-editor, and infused billions of the modified viruses into the retinas of Knight's left eye and Kalberer's right eye, as well as one eye of the other five patients. The procedure was done on only one eye just in case something went wrong. The doctors hope to treat the patients' other eye after the research is complete.

The hope for the experiment was for the CRISPR, once inside the cells of the retina, to eradicate the genetic mutation causing the disease and to restore vision by reactivating the dormant cells. This is the first time researchers have infused the CRISPR directly into human cells in the body.

The procedure didn't work for all patients in the experiment who were followed for between three and nine months. The reasons it didn't work for everyone may have to do with the dose being too low or perhaps a patient's vision was too damaged.

The treatment is far from curing the patients in the trial but the changes some experienced are significant enough to have a meaningful impact on their daily lives. For example, Michael Kalberer can now recognize shapes and light much better, and he has regained some peripheral vision. "It has enabled me to navigate a plate of food and stab food a little bit easier. If I look down at a plate of food and there's a spoon or utensil in it, I can see the edge of the utensil on the outside of the bowl or plate. So, these changes are very, very significant to me."

The doctors leading the project are thrilled to see early signs of efficacy. Never before has the gene-editing tool CRISPR been infused directly into cells in the human body - and it's working!

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND AND LYFT PARTNER DURING COVID-19 TO EXPAND TRANSPORTATION TO BLIND AMERICANS

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) has partnered with Lyft to provide access to transportation for blind people by distributing Lyft discount codes through its affiliates. The partnership is a Lyft initiative. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Lyft has activated more than 500 partners through LyftUp. This includes efforts in collaboration with public health entities, local governments, nonprofits, and community organizations to create new opportunities for drivers, provide rides to those in need, and help distribute essential goods during the pandemic.

“Access to affordable, reliable transportation is always critical for blind people, but particularly at this time, since public transportation and paratransit services are being scaled back to stop the spread of the coronavirus,” said Mark Riccobono, President of the NFB. “Partnership with Lyft is one way in which the NFB is protecting and connecting blind people by facilitating essential travel to purchase food, medicine, and other crucial goods and services that we and our families need. We commend Lyft and its driver community for collaborating with us to make this possible.”

UPCOMING EVENTS

2nd Thursdays Support Group Meetings

November 18: social meeting

December 9: Christmas Party

Audio-Described Performances

November 5: Wild Party

November 6: Wild Party

December 3: A Midsummer Night's Dream

December 4: A Midsummer Night's Dream



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