

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

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The OUTLOOK

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2014

**Official Newsletter of the Sight-Loss
Support Group of Central PA, Inc.**

LUNCH BUNCH

**The Lunch Bunch: Thursday, February 20 & March 20,
Mount Nittany Residences**

**The Lunch Bunch always shares a simple lunch and
excellent conversation. All are welcome; just bring a
sandwich – drinks are “on the house.” Mount Nittany
Residences is located at 301 Rolling Ridge Drive
behind Hills Plaza.**

COME TO THE THEATRE IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH!

**Mark your calendars: Five different productions will be
audio described in February and March!**

***Compagnie/Kafig: Eisenhower Auditorium, Tuesday,
February 4, 7:30 pm**

***ANNIE, The Musical: Wednesday, February 5, 7:30 pm, The State Theater (Free admission!)**
****See the December/January newsletter for a synopsis of these shows.***

Disney's Beauty and the Beast: Wednesday, February 6, 7:30 pm, Eisenhower Auditorium.

This classic love story is set to music and filled with unforgettable characters, lavish sets and costumes. Dazzling production numbers include "Be Our Guest" and the beloved title song. Come experience the enchantment and romance!

Swan Lake: Thursday, March 20, 7:30 pm, Eisenhower Auditorium

This production by the Moscow Festival Ballet is based on the seminal 1895 choreography of Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. Peter Tchaikovsky's heralded score serves as the foundation for the love story between Prince Siegfried and his beloved Swan Queen Odette. The evil sorcerer Baron Von Rothbart attempts, through deception, to keep the couple apart and Odette entrapped in his spell.

Memphis: Thursday, March 27, 7:30 pm, Eisenhower Auditorium

Don't miss this hot new Broadway musical! From the underground dance clubs of the 1950s in Memphis, Tennessee, comes the musical that bursts off the stage with explosive dancing, irresistible songs, and a thrilling tale of fame and forbidden love. Inspired by actual events, Memphis is about a radio DJ who wants to change the world, and a club singer who's ready for her big break. Experience their incredible journey to the ends of the airwaves and all the laughter, soaring emotion, and roof-raising rock 'n' roll. Winner of four 2010 Tony Awards, including Best Musical!

PAM'S CORNER

My spelling performance has gone to the dogs and I've noticed in notes from others that I am not alone. The latest was a note from my electrician who kindly left the word "fur-ass" on a Post-it note attached to the ceiling in my basement. I thought it was a joke since I had set out a few mouse traps in that area to see if any mice took shelter in my old house during the Polar Freeze. I removed the note to investigate and was happy to find that there were no furry asses (please excuse me)..... just the furnace fuse box.

As you all know, I have worked with visually impaired people (VIPs) for many years and have heard many complaints from clients about losing the ability to spell correctly with the excuse that they no longer read visually. An assistive technology blog for people with reading disabilities, including low vision and blindness, may be a good resource to consider: <http://bdmtech.blogspot.com>. The website allows the user to change the font size and hear the article with a listen button. It is another source to keep up with some of the new technology.

I discovered a solution to our spelling issue in one of their articles at the website - the free Merriam-Webster Voice Activated Dictionary app for iOS and Android. "The app allows users to speak their search into their device just with their voice. The speech recognition is very accurate and speedy. Voice activation allows users to search for a word that they cannot spell. In addition to voice search, the app includes a pronunciation button which allows you to hear the correct pronunciation of a word. The app uses Nuance's speech recognition engine for voice activation." The free app is available at the site. Simply type "Merriam-Webster Voice Activated

Dictionary” in the search box to get to the description of the app and download. Happy Valentine’s Day to all!

NEED AN ACCESS TECHNOLOGY TRAINER?

Ever acquired an assistive technology device but lacked the training to use the equipment proficiently? You are not alone. Mary Anne Cowfer is a Certified Access Technology Trainer who can help. Mary Anne trains blind and visually impaired individuals to use a wide range of adaptive products from computer software to recording devices.

Mary Anne graduated from the Access Technology Institute and also received training from the Carroll Center for the Blind, Hadley School for the Blind and Freedom Scientific. Mary Anne runs her own consulting business, BOMAC Consulting in Tyrone, PA. In addition to training independently (one-on-one, on-line or in a classroom setting), she is a vendor for the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services and a contractor for the Veteran’s Administration in Altoona.

Mary Anne trains on all Windows operating systems from Windows XP to Windows 8. She helps people master screen readers such as JAWS, Window Eyes, System Access and NVDA, as well as the screen magnification programs ZoomText and Magic. She also trains people on the scanning software of Kurzweil and Open Book, Apple’s iOS devices, NoteTakers and Braille displays. The list goes on and on. Mary Anne is blind and uses many of these devices in her everyday life. To be in touch with Mary Anne Cowfer for additional information, you may contact her at (814) 215-0853 or bomac27@comcast.net.

GENE THERAPY SHOWS PROMISE IN TREATING A RARE FORM OF RETINAL DEGENERATION

The following is an article from the Wall Street Journal, January 15, 2014

Scientists have improved the vision of a small number of patients suffering from a rare and incurable eye disease by replacing a defective gene with a healthy one. The patients have choroideremia, a degenerative disease caused by defects in a single gene that leads to blindness and affects 1 in 50,000 people. In an early-stage trial published in the *Lancet*, the researchers used a deactivated virus to safely ferry billions of healthy, lab-made versions of the gene into the retina. That appeared to restore the function of light-sensitive cells, which the disease impairs.

"We were surprised by the magnitude of vision improvement" in the patients, said Robert MacLaren, a professor of ophthalmology at the University of Oxford in England and leader of the clinical trial. The experiment marks one of the first times that gene therapy has targeted the main light-sensing cells in the retina. It thus offers a possible route for treating far more common causes of blindness that affect the same cells, such as retinitis pigmentosa and age-related macular degeneration.

Gene therapy involves the use of DNA, rather than a protein or drug, to treat an ailment. The idea is that if the DNA gets properly embedded in the target cells, it can potentially remain there indefinitely and deliver benefits for a long time. Gene therapy fell out of favor after a handful of early studies led to cancer and death. That's a big reason why it hasn't yet led to a single authorized treatment in the U.S.

Now, the technique is making a comeback. For example, in three early-stage clinical trials done a few years ago, the technique was used against a retinal disease called Leber congenital amaurosis. And in November 2012, European regulators approved a gene-therapy treatment for a rare condition that leaves patients unable to properly digest fats—the first such approval in the Western world.

The eye disorder treated in the *Lancet* study, choroideremia, is caused by defects in a single gene on the X chromosome and mainly affects boys. Many start losing night vision by age 10 and become legally blind in their 40s. Because of the defective gene, light-sensitive cells in the retina slowly stop working and then die. Professor MacLaren's team decided to make healthy versions of the gene in the lab, load each onto a small virus (one that doesn't cause disease in people) and inject the mix under the retina.

The trial began with six patients; two still had excellent visual acuity, two other patients had good acuity, and two had reduced acuity. Six months after the operation, the two patients with reduced acuity showed improved vision, being able to read two and four more lines on the sight chart. The others could see better in dim light. The gains were sustained over several months of follow-up. A 65-year-old in the trial said that when he watches a soccer game on TV now, the "green of the pitch is brighter and the numbers on the shirt much clearer." Another trial participant said he can now see stars in the night sky, which he hadn't seen for a long time.

Altering a patient's DNA is risky because it can trigger dangerous side-effects. In this case, there was no sign of an immune reaction in the first six months of the

follow-up, according to the *Lancet* study. The scientists hope to treat patients before their sight falters. "We want to preserve the vision they've got," said Professor MacLaren. He now plans to test the technique on a larger group of about 30 patients.

THE BLIND GIRL AND ST. VALENTINE

Valentines Day - red roses, heart shaped boxes of candy and sentimental valentine cards – how did it all begin? As with Christmas and Easter, Valentine's Day has its roots in an intermingling of pagan and Christian traditions. The Romans celebrated Lupercalia, a festival of romance and fertility honoring lovers and the hope of spring's return. In the 5th century the Christian Church transfigured this pagan festival into the feast of St. Valentine, honoring a humble Christian martyr who was put to death on February 14th for refusing to renounce his Christian faith. The original pagan connection to love has remained throughout the ages.

St. Valentine was a Christian priest and a doctor who lived in Italy during the third century A.D.; a learned man known for his medical and spiritual healing abilities. Valentine was renowned for marrying Christian couples who were in love, but forbidden to marry legally in Rome during the reign of Emperor Claudius II. Valentine also dedicated himself to converting Roman citizens to Christianity and aiding Christians who were persecuted by the Roman Emperor. Valentine has even been credited with attempting to convert the emperor himself. Claudius II was outraged and had Valentine arrested. Valentine was eventually imprisoned and sentenced to die for his actions and beliefs.

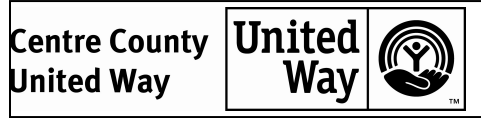


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Legend has it that while under house arrest Valentine befriended the judge who convicted him, ultimately converting the man and his blind daughter Julia. Valentine agreed to teach Julia and also attempted to heal her blindness. On the eve of his death, Valentine wrote a farewell note to Julia thanking her for her friendship and encouraging her to stay close to God. He signed the note "From your Valentine." According to the legend, when Julia opened the note she was able to see the brilliant color of a yellow crocus tucked inside the note; her eyesight restored as she opened the very first valentine.

Happy Valentine's Day !

February/March 2014