



2024 AER AWARD WINNERS

Gala Saber Brooks

Ambrose M. Shotwell Award

In recognition of outstanding contributions to the rehabilitation of adults who are blind or visually impaired

A long time ago and far, far away, Gala Saber Brooks arrived two months prematurely, in the small village of Jewett, Ohio, population 1,018. Her formative years were spent in Cambridge, Ohio where she was a proud Bobcat. This tried-and-true Buckeye graduated from Ohio State University. At the Ohio State School for the Blind, she received her introduction to education for children with vision loss and Orientation and Mobility. Then onto Western Michigan University where she became a Bronco and learned all about O&M.

Gala journeyed to the Veterans Administration Hospital at Hines, Illinois for her internship and there she remained for almost 34 years serving as O&M Specialist, O&M Supervisor, and Assistant Chief.

Gala's professional involvement with, initially AAWB, and then AER has been extensive. During the consolidation of AAWB and AEVH, her duties involved serving as an officer, a member of the board of directors, numerous committees, and Chairperson of the first AER international conference held in Chicago. She has been honored as the recipient of the Illinois Distinguished Service Award, The Lawrence E. Blaha Memorial Award, and the Douglas C. MacFarland Award.

Even though she is a "bit rusty" now, she continues to follow her passions of special education, the development and history of our profession, and the rehabilitation of blinded veterans with traumatic brain injuries. For the past several years, she has been traveling and enjoying the pure wonder of retirement!

Glinda Foster Hill

Mary K. Bauman Award

In recognition of outstanding contributions to the education of children who are blind or visually impaired

Glinda Foster Hill, a native Alabaman, retired in 2024 from the United States Department of Education, where she served for 27 years as an Education Research Analyst and Education Program Specialist for the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Ms. Hill managed grants and contracts in technology, research, and personnel preparation in visual impairment, early childhood, and family involvement.

She was responsible for almost every major initiative in visual impairment undertaken by OSEP, including the National Center for Leadership in Visual Impairment and its successor, the National Leadership Center in Sensory Disabilities; Bookshare; accessibility standards and NIMAC; caption and description services; and the DIAGRAM Center, aimed at increasing STEM accessibility for blind and visually impaired learners.

These initiatives reshaped education for children and adults with visual impairment and immersed the field in a technology-driven 21st century.

Ms. Hill received her B.A. from the University of Alabama and worked with infants and toddlers with multiple disabilities before receiving a Master of Education in visual impairment from Peabody College at Vanderbilt University, where she served as project coordinator for the Tennessee Technical Assistance System for Early Childhood. She was also the manager of Tennessee's Early Intervention System, then returned to Vanderbilt to pursue doctoral studies in early childhood special education, with an emphasis on infants with disabilities and their families. She lives in Washington, DC, with her husband, Rod.

Cathleen McGuire
Alfred Allen Award

In recognition of a career in providing direct service to people with visual impairments

Cathleen McGuire is the Senior Director of Vision Rehabilitation and Outreach at VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired. She has been a Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist for 21 years and is co-chair of the Policy and Funding Initiative for AER's Five-Year VRT Strategic Plan.

Cathleen serves as a Subject Matter Expert on vision rehabilitation therapy for ACVREP and is a member of the New York State Braille Advisory Committee. She has taught as an adjunct instructor for vision rehabilitation skills at CUNY/Hunter College. Cathleen has served as a NYSAER board member and presented at state, regional, and national conferences.

She is a Senior Fellow at the graduate school of public policy at CUNY/Baruch College and holds a Master's in Special Education from CUNY/ Hunter College and a B.S. in Human Services from St. John's University.

John Mc Mahon
John McAulay Award

For outstanding achievement leading to the placement of people with visual impairments into employment

John Mc Mahon earned his Master of Arts in Rehabilitation Teaching from Western Michigan University in 1985, and his Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Health Sciences from Western in 2013. Over the past 40 years, he has worked as a Vision Rehabilitation Therapist and program administrator in Maine, and as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and Low Vision Therapist in Michigan.

He has been a long-time member of AER, and over the course of his career he has served in a variety of local and international positions in AER, ranging from Board of Directors and President of the Michigan chapter, Board of Directors of the Northeast Chapter, national committees for the Vision Rehabilitation Therapy (VRT) Division such as Certification and Code of Ethics, and as the Chair-elect, Chair, and Immediate Past Chair of the VRT Division of AER.

Dr. McMahon currently serves as the Immediate Past-Chair of the AER Rehabilitation Counseling and Employment Services Division and as Secretary for the VRT Division. Dr. Mc Mahon has published articles in peer-reviewed journals and conducted numerous presentations at various professional conferences through the years.

Larisa DeZayas

Richard L. Welsh Chapter Leadership Award

For outstanding efforts in AER chapter leadership

Larisa DeZayas was born in Nashville, Tennessee and grew up in Chattanooga. After high school graduation, Larisa left town and earned her Honour's B.A. specializing in Theatre and Drama Studies with a major in Exceptionality in Human Learning (Psychology) from University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada. Then in 1996-97, Larisa attended the brand new and now past AER-accredited graduate program at Mohawk College in Brantford, ON. She completed her O&M internship at the Montreal Association of the Blind. From there she graduated and became a Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist (COMS).

Larisa's early career took place mainly in Wisconsin from 2000-2018, where she raised her two children, Irena and Cera, to adulthood before returning home to Chattanooga. Wisconsin beckoned her because of the state's strong blind rehabilitation programs led by knowledgeable supervisors and its active AER chapter. She provided blind rehabilitation services as a COMS, and at times as a generalist, to Vocational Rehabilitation clients, K-12 school children, and seniors. Lastly in Wisconsin, she helped develop the Advanced Low Vision Clinic at the Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, including its successful first bid for CARF accreditation. She provided O&M for Veterans there for 10 years. In 2009-2011, Larisa served on the Board and as Board President for the Wisconsin AER Chapter, gaining valuable insights from her mentors and experience as a leader.

Now back in Chattanooga, Larisa primarily provides Orientation & Mobility instruction as a contractor through Allied Instructional Services (AIS) for school districts in Southeast Tennessee and North Georgia. She has maintained an ongoing relationship with other contracting organizations including Blind Early Services of Tennessee (BEST), State of Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and Signal Centers – Assistive Technology Services. Even outside of employment, she voluntarily offers mentorship to young and new professionals in blindness-related fields, referral assistance to people in need of information following vision loss, and energetic support for strengthening services to people with blindness and low vision across the lifespan.

Larisa has renewed her commitment to AER through her work as the Tennessee AER Chapter President. She recruited reliable, dedicated professionals in the state to join her via the AER vehicle. Her goal has been to bring focus to finding strategies to help Tennessee professionals meet the needs of students, clients, patients, customers who are living with vision impairments, vision loss, and blindness. As a subsequent result of the efforts of its board and committees, TN AER Chapter has gained recognition as an emerging platform for important conversations between professional providers and referral sources throughout the state.

Larisa married one of her best friends from childhood, William McAmis, in tiny ceremony on the deck of her home in August 2020. They have since acquired three senior cats and two young Great Pyrenees dogs, Boris and Tasha.

Tennessee AER

Outstanding Chapter Award

For outstanding efforts in providing services to its members

Forty years ago, in 1984, in Nashville, Tennessee, the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) was formed when two existing professional organizations merged - the American Association of Workers for the Blind and the Association for Education of the Visually Handicapped. Forty years later, the Tennessee Chapter of AER (TN AER) is the worthy recipient of AER's Outstanding Chapter Award for 2024.

Even with its auspicious start, by 2021, the board of the TN AER openly recognized a gap in meaningful chapter activity and engagement starting in about 2010, when the chapter conference became absorbed in the Unity Conference at the Tennessee School for the Blind. Following the conference collaboration, TN AER soon lost its essential identity. Concerned members reached out to one another, looking for ways to improve the situation for professional advocacy for the sake of our clients and students. There clearly was a need to revamp the TN AER's efforts to support professionals as well as professional development in blind/low vision fields. Toward the end of the Covid social distancing period in 2020-2021, new chapter leadership was voted in, some dedicated members of the past board remained, and new enthusiastic board members were recruited. Together the team began setting small, reliable, obtainable goals to rebuild the chapter. Over time, small steps covered a lot of ground. TN AER has become a platform for providing the advocacy and education that are its purpose. TN AER chapter has regained its identity as a resource for professionals in Tennessee.

Mainly, TN AER chapter has renewed its dedication to its bylaws, including the organization of committees. "The work of the committees IS the work of the chapter." Members are encouraged to pursue their strongest interests, to expand their skills through committee work, and to offer their mentorship to one another. Committee formation and activity has been integral to the growth of the chapter and to building an increasing awareness of AER throughout the state. The chapter has hosted annual conferences in 2023 and 2024. The Membership Committee recognizes members, both new and sustained. Marketing and Fundraising has produced a new logo through a logo

competition, sold t-shirts, maintained an active Facebook page and email listserv, and set up booths at events around the state to raise awareness of TN AER. The Legislative Committee has active meetings and conversations with state-level administrators. And the Elections Committee has provided a sense of stability with a predictable schedule and standardized voting process using up-to-date technology. The Awards and Scholarships Committee presented a Lifetime Achievement Award to Dorothy Morris. As the recipient of AER's Outstanding Chapter Award for 2024, TN AER looks forward to moving ahead with reinforced esteem and momentum. Our hope is to use the tools provided by AER to set and maintain increasingly high standards and requirements for all blind/ low vision services, including all related agencies, employers, employees and contractors, early intervention, K-12 school systems, and university training programs.