

# AER Orientation and Mobility Awards Ceremony 2024



**AER International Conference 2024**  
**July 24-28, 2024**  
**Charlotte, NC**



# WELCOME

The AER Orientation and Mobility Division Awards Program is dedicated to recognizing elite individuals who epitomize the essence of awards that highlight a strong commitment to excellence.

Our profession is filled with individuals who have demonstrated commitment, dedication, and integrity that is extraordinary; and we are pleased to honor three individuals who have made profound accomplishments during their career. Each is inspirational, and the contributions that they have made to help persons with visual impairments to travel more independently will undoubtedly motivate the next generation to break performance boundaries.

Thank you for joining us on this very special occasion and please share in and enjoy the celebration.

## Award Committee:

Nick Leon, Chair

Tommie Roesch

Tricia Sproles

Margaret Winn

Mary Kline

JoAnne Chalom

Susan Drake

George Zimmerman

Susan Langendonk

Judith Porro

Ana Williams

# PROGRAM

Welcome and Introductions.....Nick Leon

## **Orientation and Mobility Division Award Recipients - 2024**

*The Orientation and Mobility Citation of Excellence for Direct Service*

### **Benjamin Bossley**

Introduction of Award Recipient.....Nick Leon

*The Janet Barlow Environmental Access Service Award*

### **Billie Louise (Beezy) Bentzen**

Introduction of Award Recipient.....Lukas Franck

*The Lawrence E. Blaha Memorial Award*

### **Rona Pogrund**

Introduction of Award Recipient..... Nora Shirley-Griffin

## THE ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY CITATION OF EXCELLENCE FOR DIRECT SERVICE

This year's recipient is **Benjamin Bossley**

I wanted to take a moment to share my genuine support for Benjamin Bossley and his nomination for the Orientation and Mobility Citation of Excellence for Direct Service. Since joining the Lighthouse Central Florida team back in 2013, I've seen firsthand the incredible impact Benjamin has had on our organization and the community we serve.

Lighthouse Central Florida isn't just a workplace—it's a beacon of hope and support for individuals with visual impairments. Our mission is simple yet profound: to empower individuals with vision loss to live independently and with dignity, beyond the restrictions of vision loss and blindness. We believe that everyone deserves access to the tools, resources, and support they need to thrive, regardless of their level of vision.

At the heart of our mission is a commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. Whether it's through our orientation and mobility programs, access technology training, or advocacy efforts, we're dedicated to breaking down barriers and creating a more inclusive society for all.

This is why Benjamin's work is so crucial.

Since joining Lighthouse Central Florida, Benjamin has been an integral part of our team. From his early days as an Early Intervention Mentor, working with our youngest and most fragile clients, to his current role as a COMS and Supervisor overseeing our team of Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists, Benjamin has continuously and consistently gone above and beyond to make a difference in the lives of his clients. His innovative programs and advocacy efforts, particularly through promoting accessible streets and intersections, have transformed countless lives and have helped us further our mission of empowering individuals with vision loss.

One of the things that truly sets Benjamin apart is his role as a mentor and educator. His ability to share his knowledge with infectious enthusiasm and patience has not only



empowered countless individuals but has also inspired a new generation of O&M specialists within our organization. Benjamin's dedication to fostering independence, safety, and advocacy shines through in everything he does. Lighthouse Central Florida's mission is more than just a statement—it's a commitment to creating a brighter, more inclusive future for individuals with vision loss. Benjamin Bossley's nomination for the Orientation and Mobility Citation of Excellence for Direct Service is a testament to his dedication to this mission and his tireless efforts to make a difference in the lives of others. I can confidently say that without Benjamin's tireless efforts, many of our clients would not be living the lives they are today – truly empowered.

Sincerely,

Kyle Johnson  
President and CEO  
Lighthouse Central Florida/Lighthouse Works

## **About the Orientation and Mobility Citation of Excellence for Direct Service**

### **History:**

The Orientation and Mobility Citation of Excellence for Direct Service was established in 1985 to present "to a younger member of the profession, to encourage Orientation and Mobility specialists whose present excellent teaching records already foreshadow promising careers in our profession" (1996-97 Division newsletter). It continues to be awarded to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions to the profession during the first ten years of their career in Orientation and Mobility and to encourage these individuals to continue their promising careers in our profession.

# THE JANET BARLOW ENVIRONMENTAL ACCESS SERVICE AWARD

## Awarded to **Billie Louise (Beezy) Bentzen**

Have you ever noticed yellow detectable warning tiles at a ramp into the street or heard an audible sound letting you know when the walk sign came on? Meet one of the women behind those innovations.

We would like to recommend Dr. Billie Louise (Beezy) Bentzen, Certified Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Specialist, for the 2024 Janet Morgan Barlow Environmental Access Service Award. Her life work, dedication, and achievements have significantly improved the lives of people who are blind or deafblind on a national and international level.

Dr. Bentzen's main contributions lie in her extensive human factors research history to make the built environment more accessible to pedestrians with vision disabilities, and her ardent, highly effective advocacy to apply what was learned in that research to the built environment.



A hallmark of her research is how closely it relates to reality. It was guided by many years of experience as an O&M specialist teaching blind people to travel independently, observing in person the challenges they faced and the strategies they used. Dr. Bentzen and Janet Barlow pioneered the in-situ design of research that has been invaluable in learning about problems and solutions for making the environment accessible. For example, when designing research to determine whether curb ramps are a problem for blind travelers, rather than studying it in the lab or setting up conditions, they had 80 subjects in 8 different cities each approaching 10 corners to find the edge. Not only did they find that curb ramps are indeed a problem, but they also gathered valuable information about the cues that blind travelers actually use to try to recognize the street. Today her research continues to find her collecting data with blind subjects at real intersections to assess challenges and solutions.

As the founder of Accessible Design for the Blind, she has followed this research with numerous presentations, articles, and papers on accessibility issues to ensure this knowledge is shared. She then takes the next step which is to tirelessly advocate, collaborate, and provide consultation to make sure that best practice in infrastructure design becomes a part of national (and often international) standards.

Her research areas have included large print, tactile, and electronic signs, audible signs, tactile maps, accessible pedestrian signals, visual contrast, detectable warnings, accessibility of roundabouts, alignment issues, and a variety of wayfinding technologies.

Most recently she has been concentrating on new complex intersection designs – designs that make the environment safer for sighted pedestrians and cyclists but often make it more dangerous for pedestrians with visual disabilities, such as floating transit islands, quick-build sidewalk extensions, and bikeways at sidewalk level.

Her primary focus has been and continues to be providing all involved in the design process to comprehend and respect the needs of each other fully. Over the years, Beezy has collaborated with traffic engineers, designers, project managers, signal technicians, landscape architects, city officials and universities, and developed the relationship between that community and the blindness community: with O&M Specialists, Guide Dog Mobility Instructors, and pedestrians with vision disabilities.

The respect she's earned within the transportation professional community speaks volumes. At the most recent Transportation Research Board (TRB) Conference held in Washington DC last month, Beezy was allowed to provide presentations within four different pedestrian-related committees and/or groups - an offer that was not extended to many. The feedback from these committee members has been instrumental in furthering the collaboration efforts as well as continuing to advocate for pedestrians with vision disabilities as it pertains to new design and infrastructure.

Dr. Bentzen strongly believes in the right of pedestrians with visual disabilities to equal access which is captured in her quote "Pedestrians with visual disabilities need the right information at the right time for safe independent travel." She takes the very personal barriers in ordinary people's lives, finds solutions on the ground with them, and then makes those solutions available to other people everywhere nationally and internationally. You will not find a more deserving person for The Janet Morgan Barlow Environmental Access Service Award than Dr. Beezy Bentzen.

Sincerely,

Lindy Myers, COMS  
Jennifer Graham, COMS  
Dona Sauerburger, COMS



## About the Janet Barlow Environmental Access Service Award

### History:

The Janet Barlow Environmental Access Service Award was established in 2021 to recognize professionals who demonstrate distinguished service in orientation and mobility through a long-term commitment to environmental access. The award was named for Janet Barlow because of her lifelong commitment and dedication to the field, her steadfast, practical, and strategic methods to address research needs, advocacy for greater accessibility to the built environment, and education of orientation and mobility specialists and transportation professionals such as traffic engineers and urban planners on issues relevant to both professional areas.

Janet worked as an orientation and mobility specialist, manager, and advocate in Georgia at the Atlanta Area Services for the Blind, now known as the Center for the Visually Impaired. Her practical experience prepared her well for her next career, researching techniques to make the built environment more accessible to pedestrians with vision loss. At the time of her passing in August 2021, Janet was President of Accessible Design for the Blind (ADB), a small research organization started by Dr. Beezy Bentzen. Under Janet's leadership, ADB became well-recognized for human factors research related to environmental access. Major topics that Janet investigated include accessible pedestrian signals, roundabouts, and tactile walking surface indicators such as detectable warnings and guidance surfaces. In 2017, together with Diane Fazzi, COMS, Ph.D. she wrote *Orientation and Mobility Techniques: A Guide for the Practitioner*, a manual for the teaching of O&M, now used as a textbook in university programs preparing O&M specialists. Janet was also the original author of two chapters in *Foundations of Orientation and Mobility*, 3rd ed., the authoritative textbook on the theory, research, and practice of O&M, "Environmental Accessibility for Students with Vision Loss", and "Teaching Travel at Complex Intersections." She authored many papers and was a sought-after speaker at conferences and workshops.

The first Janet Barlow Environmental Access Service Award was awarded to her posthumously and presented to her family at the 2022 AER International Conference in St Louis, Missouri. Janet Barlow was posthumously chosen as the first recipient of this award because of her lifelong dedication to the field of orientation and mobility and active involvement with numerous professional activities and committees while maintaining a special focus on building mutual understanding between orientation and mobility specialists, traffic engineers, and urban planners.

The establishment of this award is fitting tribute to Janet Barlow and to all the countless other orientation and mobility specialists who forego higher paying careers in order to continue doing what they know and love best, including creating mutual understanding and respect between orientation and mobility specialists, urban planners, and traffic engineers. The award will be given only when a worthy recipient is determined.

## THE LAWRENCE E. BLAHA MEMORIAL AWARD

### This year's recipient **Rona Pogrund**

I am nominating Dr. Pogrund for the Lawrence E. Blaha Award. Having been in the field since 1972, Rona has **many achievements that have made a significant impact on the orientation and mobility (O&M) field** through her publications, teaching, and service. She has been at the forefront of the O&M field by introducing the use of a cane for preschoolers, the creation of an O&M assessment and curriculum, and the development of a service delivery scale for teachers of students with visual impairment (TSVI) and O&M specialists.

Rona has **contributed greatly to our body of knowledge** by authoring 19 book chapters, 37 journal articles, 7 books, and other publications. The knowledge gained early in her career from Rona's education and work experience as a TSVI, a principal, and an O&M specialist enabled her to develop a research agenda focused on early childhood and

O&M, caseload analysis for practitioners, program evaluation (e.g., dual certified professionals, short term programs at a school for the blind), models for assistive technology, and canes for preschoolers. Her books are used by O&M students as resources to study for the national ACVREP O&M examination, as textbooks in personnel preparation programs for the TSVIs and O&M specialists. Many authors have cited Rona's publications, which attest to the high quality of her work.

Rona is a very successful grant writer by obtaining over \$14 million in personnel preparation and research grants. Since 1987 her personnel preparation grants have facilitated the recruitment of

**many individuals into the O&M field and education of children with visual impairment.** In most cases, these graduates sought employment teaching people who were blind and visually impaired, thus helping to meet a national need.

Through her numerous consultative roles and leadership responsibilities in academe and our professional organizations, Rona has **provided leadership and mentorship** to many different constituents (e.g., university students, individuals who are visually impaired, colleagues, companies, etc.). The impact of her mentoring is hard to document.

In summary, Rona is a consummate professional who has been an innovator, mentor, writer, leader, and friend. Her many contributions to the O&M field are admirable. She has been a strong force who has had a positive influence on many students, professionals and children who are visually impaired and their families. Thus, she is **very deserving** of the



Blaha Award.

Sincerely,

Nora Griffin-Shirley, Ph.D  
Coordinator of O&M Program  
Director of Virginia Murray Sowell Center for  
Research and Education In Sensory Disabilities

## **About the Lawrence E. Blaha Memorial Award & Sir Francis Campbell Cane**

### **History**

The Lawrence E. Blaha Award was initiated in 1968 to honor people who have shown exemplary behavior in the field of O&M, made outstanding contributions to the profession and shown dedication to serving people with visual impairments. It is the highest honor that the O&M Division can bestow. Each recipient of this award is the Guardian of Sir Francis Campbell's Cane until it is passed along to the next award recipient. The handle of the cane was used by Sir Francis Campbell, and can be seen in a photograph of him that is displayed in The C. Warren Bledsoe Orientation and Mobility Archives. The Lawrence E. Blaha Memorial Award is given every two years.

### **About Lawrence E. Blaha**

This award was named in honor of Lawrence Blaha who was a pioneer in the field of O&M. He is remembered for his wit, athletic abilities, philosophy, technical skill and his high standards. He was an educator whose ideas are remembered and continued through this award. In 1948, he began his career working with people with visual impairments at the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center for Visually Impaired and Blinded Veterans, VA Hospital, Hines Illinois. He was one of a group of six individuals chosen for training to become the original O&M specialists at Hines. In 1961, he joined the faculty of Western Michigan University; from 1964 until his sudden death, he was Director of the O&M program at California State College, Los Angeles. The first Lawrence E. Blaha Award was given to him posthumously in 1968.

### **About Sir Francis Campbell**

Sir Francis Campbell, whose cane handle is passed along to award recipients, was an American expatriate who was knighted by King Edward VII. Campbell was born in Tennessee and accidentally blinded before he was six. He was educated at the Tennessee State Institute for the Blind and at the University of Tennessee. Campbell taught music at the Perkins School for the Blind. At Perkins, he was involved in early efforts to teach orientation and mobility.

## PREVIOUS AWARD RECIPIENTS

### **Past Recipients of The Orientation and Mobility Citation of Excellence for Direct Service are:**

1986	Peggy Madera, Judy Davidhizar-Holmes
1988	Joni Levy Myers
1990	Judy Hayes
1992	Bonnie Dodson-Burk, Darick Wright
1994	Carol Otten, Colleen Calhoon
1996	Sharon O'Mara Maida
1998	Mary Konigzfeld-Wejrowski
2000	James Scott Crawford
2002	John E. Clare
2004	Julie Hapeman
2006	Danene Fast
2008	Not Awarded
2010	Marcia Vickroy
2012	Shannon Cuniak
2014	Not Awarded
2016	Raychel Callary
2018	Mary Ball-Swartwout
2020	Not Awarded
2022	Not Awarded

## PREVIOUS AWARD RECIPIENTS

### **Past Recipients of The Janet Barlow Environmental Access Service Award are:**

2022 Janet Barlow, posthumously

## PREVIOUS AWARD RECIPIENTS

### **Past Recipients of The Lawrence E. Blaha Memorial Award are:**

1968	Lawrence E. Blaha, posthumously
1969	Dr. Richard E. Hoover, MD
1972	W.G. Debetaz
1973	Stanley Suterko
1975	Russell C. Williams
1977	Donald Blasch
1979	John D. Malamazian
1981	John R. Eichorn, Ed.D.
1983	Leicester W. Farmer
1984	C. Warren Bledsoe
1986	Walter G. Olenek
1988	Richard L. Welsh
1990	Hugo Vigoroso
1992	Everett "Butch" Hill
1994	Berdell "Pete" Wurzburger
1996	William Wiener
1998	Bruce B. Blasch
2000	Gala Saber Brooks
2002	Billie Louise Bentzen
2004	Dona Sauerburger
2006	Steve LaGrow
2008	Janet Barlow
2010	Eileen Siffermann
2012	Richard Long
2014	George Zimmerman
2016	Sandra J. Rosen
2018	Rod Kossick
2020	Nora Griffin-Shirley
2022	Laura Bozeman