

## The Blind Visionary

*A visually impaired CEO teaches our columnist a few lessons in the art of foresight, planning, and leadership. Do you have similar visionary leaders in your schools?*

*"It's great to meet you at last!" Turning around and seeing Virginia for the first time, I was taken aback. "She is blind, isn't she?" I thought to myself. "Of course she is, you idiot, there's her guide dog at her side." But for a couple of seconds, seeing her radiant smile, her bright blue eyes looking directly at me, her outstretched hand, I wasn't sure.*

**T**his account of my first meeting with Virginia Jacko in September 2006 appears in the opening pages of a book that we have co-authored and which is being published this month. Titled *The Extraordinary Odyssey of a Blind Visionary*, it tells the story of Virginia, a visionary leader who just happens to be blind.

Since January 2005, Virginia has been president and CEO of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. This nonprofit organization provides vocational rehabilitation to adults and a wide range of other services to both adults and children, including art and music education, in Florida's Dade County.

For around six months, Virginia and I

worked closely together as client and consultant to update the governing role of the Lighthouse board and modernize its committee structure. Our book draws on Virginia's story to provide readers with practical guidance in overcoming personal and professional barriers on the way to a more vision-driven, fulfilling life.

And what a story it is.

### Obstacles and success

Virginia worked in investment banking and accounting before staying at home with her three children. In the late 1970s, she took a job as a part-time administrator at Purdue University, where her husband Bob was an engineering professor. She rapidly rose through the administrative ranks and, by the mid 1990s, was a senior financial executive working directly with Purdue's president, provost, and treasurer.

After working tremendously hard to build a highly successful higher education career that she loved, she faced a potentially devastating challenge in the form of retinitis pigmentosa, an eye disease that attacks a person's peripheral vision first and inexorably leads to total blindness.

Many people in Virginia's situation would probably have packed it in. With her disability payments and Bob's salary, she didn't need the money, but Virginia was no quitter. She labored mightily to perform at a high level in her highly demanding job, keeping her condition secret from all but her closest colleagues until her last months at the university.

Bob drove her to work and walked with her to meeting rooms around the campus so she could get the lay of the land before making presentations. She spent evenings and weekends memoriz-



ing financial information so she wouldn't "look blind" in meetings by having to read material just inches from her eyes.

But with her eyesight growing steadily worse, in November 2000 Virginia realized she needed specialized education to continue to function as a blind executive. In January 2001, she enrolled in a vocational rehabilitation program at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. She completed the program in June, went to guide dog training later that summer, and started dividing her time between Miami and her home with Bob in West Lafayette, Ind.

As a Lighthouse volunteer, she was asked to join the organization's board in fall 2004. Soon after, she became interim president and CEO, and has been the permanent CEO since June 2005. Today, she is one of only a handful of blind CEOs in the United States, and she has overseen dramatic growth in the Lighthouse's financial resources and programming.

She's constantly out in the Greater Miami community, speaking on the Lighthouse's behalf in various forums, cultivating donors, and serving on a number of boards and advisory bodies. She works closely with her board to transform the Lighthouse into a "center of excellence," which includes the goal of a close partnership with the Miami-

Dade Public Schools to provide ongoing training for public school teachers who work with mainstreamed blind students. She also frequently travels alone to the state capital in Tallahassee to testify before legislative bodies.

### Questions you should ask

If you've read this far, you're probably asking yourself, "This is an interesting story, but what does it have to do with school governance?"

Here are four questions that you might want to discuss with your board colleagues, superintendent, and senior administrative staff:

- Are there Virginia Jackos in your community, and are you encouraging them to consider school board service?

This runs counter to the conventional wisdom that you aren't accountable for the composition of your board, but I strongly disagree. If you believe passionately in public education, then you have to care about governance, which means caring about the people serving on your board.

Virginia Jacko obviously fits the profile of an ideal school board member: bright, passionately committed to education, extraordinarily hard working, creative problem solver and enthusiastic networker with ties throughout her community, experienced governor, and

accomplished speaker. She also is living proof of the transformative power of education. What an addition she would make to any school board.

- Are you actively looking for role models like Virginia, whose lives vividly demonstrate the power of education—when harnessed with a positive attitude, self-discipline, hard work, and tenacity—to overcome significant physical or psychological barriers?

- Are you making sure that these role models, who have so much to offer your students, are tapped as part of your district's educational programming?

- Finally, if your district has one or more blind students, are you sure they are receiving the assistance they need—such as a Braille note-taker—to succeed in the classroom?

You well know that education involves much more than just classroom activities. Taking advantage of community resources like Virginia Jacko, who have inspiring and instructional stories to tell, is one important way to enrich the educational experience in your district. ■

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