

SILO Newsletter: April 2026

A Message from the CEO

Recently, the concept of isolation and loneliness within the disability community has become a major topic of discussion, especially among empirical researchers. An abundance of research is being conducted across the country, and the findings tend to be consistent, though concerning, in what they reveal about people with disabilities and isolation.

Within the disability community, according to B. Gomez Zúñiga, “people with disabilities experience loneliness to a greater extent than those without disabilities.” Additionally, a nationwide study conducted by the Brown University School of Public Health found that nearly one-third of adults with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 64 reported persistent feelings of loneliness, lack of companionship, and social isolation. About two-thirds of respondents reported experiencing severe loneliness, regardless of the type of disability.

When examining the causes of isolation, many factors come into play, including health constraints, physical barriers, marginalization, and societal attitudes. Economic inequality further exacerbates the issue. People with disabilities face significantly higher unemployment rates, which limits opportunities to participate in social activities or simply connect with others in their community.

The impact of isolation is profound and far-reaching. It can negatively affect an individual’s mental health, physical health, and overall quality of life. Research shows that individuals who experience loneliness and isolation are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and high blood pressure.

At SILO, we are committed to helping individuals overcome these constraints, barriers, and societal challenges. We support people with disabilities in breaking down the barriers that contribute to isolation and loneliness. SILO actively fosters and encourages inclusion in every aspect of a person’s life. We continuously seek and build partnerships across Long Island with organizations, clubs, and activity groups that offer social opportunities, empowering individuals with disabilities to connect and engage with others.

SILO has also developed a robust Employment Center that assists individuals with disabilities in identifying, seeking, and maintaining employment. Employment not only improves economic stability but also opens doors to developing meaningful social connections and long-term relationships.

In addition, SILO strongly advocates for improved accessibility throughout our communities. Our goal is to ensure that Long Island is fully accessible so that everyone can enjoy the many opportunities and resources available.

SILO is person-centered and provides numerous support groups designed to help individuals avoid loneliness, prevent isolation, build relationships, and find a sense of community.

If you are feeling isolated or experiencing loneliness, we encourage you to reach out to SILO by calling or emailing our New York Connects department. Let us help you take the next step forward.

Joseph Delgado

Chief Executive Officer

“The Man is a Success”

By: Judith Wieber

Brandon, born blind from a rare disorder, has achieved his goal to be successfully employed. A graduate of The New York Institute for Special Education in the Bronx, as well as of Suffolk Community College with an associate's degree in communications, Brandon supervises a staff of Nursing Home Peers in the Open Door Program here at SILO.

Brandon and I talked about some of the struggles he had while attending school, and some of the resources he used to get through them, such as his ardent desire to help others and strong will to push through no matter what the obstacles. He is grateful for the communications skills he learned at Suffolk, which seem to serve him well in his role as Peer Supervisor. Many of us marvel at Brandon's ability to memorize information. In fact, he has memorized all the employee telephone extensions and many staff members' birthdays.

While at the Institute for Special Education, Brandon learned braille and how to get around with a mobility White Cane for the blind. He also acquired some vocational skills, such as dining room setup, switchboard operation, and touch typing. As technology advanced, so did Brandon's toolbox, learning to use JAWS (Job Access with Speech) and other voiceover software to convert text to speech. This is used heavily in his work at Open Doors.

As Peer Supervisor, Brandon handles recruiting peers, matching them with nursing home residents wanting to transition back to living in the community. He follows up to make sure all their notes and necessary paperwork get sent back on time to the New York Association for Independent Living.

Brandon is well liked by his co-workers. Here are some things said by his colleague Maria: “Brandon is such a pleasure to have as part of the Open Doors team and as someone I work very closely with for the peer program. Brandon’s good sense of humor is a quality we love and enjoy in Open Doors. His personality and professionalism makes him a great peer supervisor that allows the peers to come to him whenever needed.”

In his free time, Brandon can be found attending self-advocacy conferences, as well as demonstrations advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. Helping to run workshops and seminars for Downstate New York ADAPT are more activities Brandon volunteers to do. He also enjoys attending support groups for people with disabilities where he gives and receives support. For fun, he likes to go out to dinner, sing, and tease the front desk person at SILO. A personal goal Brandon has set for himself is to go back to school and study human resources. He encourages others to set goals for themselves and go for it; with positive thinking and determination, everyone can be a success.

2026 BOCES Annual Agency Fair

Kelly-Rae Douglas, New York Connects Director, and Patrick Davis, Community Health Worker, attended the 2026 BOCES Annual Agency Fair on March 27. Together, they interacted with fellow community service professionals, including representatives from WellLife Network and LGBT Network. It was an immense joy to discuss the many exciting programs that SILO has to offer the community, and to spread the word about the great work we do.

“Lessons from Nature”

By: Stephanie Konarski

In much of the world life happens in seasons. Gnarled trees stretch their limbs and awaken in the springtime. Their buds give way to tender leaves and blooms that come alive with warmth. They sway in the summer breeze and provide a canopy of shade in the heat, only to shed their leaves in a kaleidoscopic display in the fall. Trees can teach us many lessons, as they are ever-changing and weather many storms. They can remind us that no season in life is permanent, and that rest is necessary for growth. Though they may face adversity, their resilience can remind us that there is strength rooted within ourselves, an innate ability that allows us to experience a variety of seasons in life. We can draw inspiration and comfort from impermanence, as it means difficult times will give way to brighter days, and reminds us to cherish times of ease.

Water is a master of transformation; its winding twists and turns shape new pathways. It doesn’t cease to flow when it finds itself blocked. Instead, it alters its journey and creates a different way through. We, too, can be like water by trusting our own path, and when faced

with adversity, finding ways to persevere. Like a river navigating over or around an obstacle, we can do the same as we travel through our lives. When we find ourselves lost and unsure how to carry on, we can also remember that we, too, are always moving into the next moment. Just as water does not know what it will find as it goes, at times neither do we, but we can borrow its courage and continue. We can also learn how to ground ourselves from the tides; their steady rhythm can remind us that we also have a rise and fall within us. Its push and pull is a lot like our own breath, which provides us with a reliable anchor point to come back to.

Flowers are infinitely diverse; they paint landscapes with their colorful displays, without wondering if they are blooming as brilliantly as the rest. Each has its own purpose, journey, and characteristics that create harmony in nature. We are like flowers in this way, all having our own abilities that we share with the world. Sometimes, we compare ourselves to one another, and it can feel as though we're falling short, but we can remember that we all have innate strengths that are important in their own way. Rather than trying to be someone we're not, we can take inspiration from plants. We can focus on growing strong roots, taking in what nourishes us, and sharing our unique traits with others, just like they do. When we focus on becoming the best versions of ourselves, we can build stability within ourselves and recognize that we are just as worthy as those around us of feeling good and celebrating our unique gifts.

Para Female Athlete of the Year – *USA Track & Field Long Island*

Dawn Cookler Acceptance Speech

Thank you so much for accepting me to be the para female athlete of the year. I've been a member of Rolling Thunder for three years on the track and field most weekend mornings at 8:30 AM in the morning. I love being part of Rolling Thunder, the best track and field team in Long Island and I am proud to accept this award. I've been competing in shotput and discus for most of my adult life, which I've learned how to do at Hofstra during my college and graduate school years. I am an alumnus of Hofstra and have a bachelor's and master's degree.

I'm a proud member of Rolling Thunder and Coach Steve has taught me how to be a better athlete and has given me the opportunity to be part of Long Island Track & Field USA, which I am very proud of. I plan to be back on the track and field in the spring winning and learning to be the best I could be under all circumstances. I never give up and will be beating the odds always. Thanks again to Coach Steve, Rolling Thunder, and Long Island USA Track & Field.

“Live Like a Guide Dog” - A Book Review

by: Judith Wieber

"Live Like a Guide Dog: True Stories from a Blind Man and His Dogs about Being Brave, Overcoming Adversity, and Moving Forward in Faith" by Michael Hingson, and co-authored by Keri Wyatt Kent, speaks to the feelings of fear we all confront. Whether it is taking a leap of faith regarding a new job, or finding your way in unfamiliar surroundings, Michael deals and successfully navigates these feelings of uncertainty. His steps and words aim to aid the reader in managing our own struggles. Faith in God, and the invaluable teachings of his dog guides, enabled him to live a productive and fulfilling life.

"Live Like a Guide Dog" was published in August 2024. It is the third book written by him. This book, like his first, "Thunder Dog", has made the New York Times Best Seller List. The book chronicles his life, from growing up in Chicago, moving to and attending college in California, marrying his wife Karen, the life they built together with their loving animals, and the traveling he did around the country and the world to have work and encourage others to live their best life by not letting fear stop you, but instead to use it as a way to make you more aware of your surroundings.

As a child, echolocation was the way he avoided obstacles in his path. He did not use a white cane. Michael used the echoing sound bouncing off objects to get around. He had what he calls a "normal childhood". He was never told he could not learn to ride a bicycle or play tag with other kids. It was when he was preparing to go to college that he learned to travel with his guide dog, Squire, the first of eight. Holland, Klondike, Lenni, Rosell, Meril, Africa, and Alamo were the names of the remaining seven. After talking about getting a degree in physics, the book goes on to talk about how he met his wife Karen, who was his true life partner of 40 years.

Karen was born with a physical condition and used a wheelchair to get around. She had her own travel agency and loved to make quilts. Karen drove and read for Michael, helped with paperwork, and served as a business partner when they started a joint consulting and speaking company. Michael is the main bread winner for their family. Though they had no children, they cared for all eight of the guide dogs, along with two retired guides, and a cat, Stich, they adopted. At the end of the book, with the passing of Karen, you feel the devotion they had to each other, and how they made things work, supported each other as equals, contributed to the relationship, and respected each other's aspirations.

Throughout the book, Michael describes the joys and challenges they met by finding lucrative work and the obstacles of traveling and dealing with loss. The pinnacle of the book is when Michael got laid off from his first steady profitable job. He became very afraid, not sure how they would manage their finances and overwhelming debt. He got turned down for a sales job after the company, impressed by his abilities and experience, did a total 180 degree turnaround when learning he was blind, and decided not to hire him. Michael, not

sure what to do, turned to prayer. The answer to his prayer came from the voice of his loving and supportive wife, who reminded him of what he had learned in the course he took in sales by Dale Carnegie: "Sell yourself and make your perceived liabilities your assets." I believe it is this trying time that brought the author to reflection and introspection, that it not only helped him to obtain his next job, but provided him with the roots for this book. By reflecting over his life and the accomplishments and anxieties of life that he managed, he came to realize that he had something to learn from each guide dog. Squire taught him to be aware of his surroundings. Holland taught him that with awareness of previous situations, you can prepare and plan, that with patience and understanding, one can apply what they have learned in the past to the present situation to be successful. Lenni was a very friendly and social pup. She taught him how to trust and make good friends who can become true allies. Rosell was the pooch who guided Michael to safety when the towers were destroyed on September 11th. Rosell taught him many things: how to trust, work as a team, and build respect; how important it is not to let fear overrun the team; that a strong faith in God can lower one's fear; and to trust the skills you have been trained to do. Meril showed him the importance of relaxation and its role in resetting your battery. Too much stress can cloud judgement and work performance. Africa educated him on confidence, when Hingson, with his tremendous faith in God, bravely took a risk starting up his own company. Africa, too, was full of confidence. It was this confidence in himself, the team, and his skills in sales and technology, that led the Kurzweil Company to seek him out for a top position instructing and selling their mobile KNF Reader. Alamo, his eighth and present dog as of the publishing of this book, came into Michael's life just before the pandemic. He describes how this caused many to isolate themselves and be fearful. Alamo came along and directed him on how to heal from tragedy and loss. He once again saw how fear can be used to prepare and focus our energy on solving a situation. It saves us from throwing caution to the wind and instead makes us realize the precautions we can take to better handle a situation.

One quote from the book that sticks with me is when Michael writes: "Being brave is embracing change and learning from it. We can refrain from fear, and change as we progress. We can move forward, a guide dog command." Throughout the book, the author acclaims putting his fears to rest by putting trust in God, and how he has and continues to provide. He shares many prayers and inspirational words of others that have helped him to develop a spiritual communication. In fact, he ends the book by posting the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Hingson has come to know and instruct on some of the latest in cutting-edge equipment to help the blind and others live more independently. He is very knowledgeable regarding assistive technology. Back in 2019, he worked for Aira, which does remote video

interpreting. He helped establish The Do More Foundation, a charity that helps families with financial needs stemming from a child's medical condition. He has also worked for accessible, a company that makes web sites accessible for all people with disabilities. As part of his responsibilities, he hosts a weekly podcast called Unstoppable Mindset. I am sure one would learn a lot from his valuable insights and resources.

The autobiographical style of this book is very lengthy, and touches on many aspects of Michael's life as only an autobiography can do. The theme is to help not only the disabled, but all who deal with the curveballs life may throw our way, and for this reason, I would recommend it to all. However, I hope he considers writing a love story about him and his wife Karen. I am sure many of us could learn from their true life examples on how to live together, and the communication it requires to make a successful couple.

Employee Spotlight:

Julianna Johnson

This month, we honor Julianna Johnson for all her hard work! Julianna is a Housing Specialist for the Rapid Transition Housing Program. She started at SILO this past September. Since then, she has prioritized her caseload and quickly learned the ins and outs of the program. Julianna is a joy to be around and brightens up the atmosphere at the office. Thanks for all you do Julianna!

Kelly-Rae Douglas

This month, we honor Kelly-Rae Douglas for all her hard work! While Kelly is the Director of New York Connects, she is very knowledgeable on all programs here at SILO. She is an amazing public speaker and ensures all programs and services are well understood by the community. She is the person to go to with all your questions! Thanks for all you do Kelly!

Upcoming Events:

Virtual Bingo: 4/21, 5/5, 5/19, 6/2, 6/16

Visit our website to register and learn more! www.siloinc.org/events

Eat Wings, Raise Funds Event at Buffalo Wild Wings

Monday, May 4th, 2026, 11:00 am – 12:00 am

1986 Middle Country Rd, Centereach, NY 11720

Dave & Buster's Fundraiser

Thursday, June 19th, 2026, 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

1856 Veterans Memorial Hwy, Islandia, NY 11749

Americans with Disabilities Act Celebration – 26th Anniversary of the ADA

Friday, July 24th, 2026, 11:00 am – 2:30 pm

3253 NY-112, Medford, NY 11762; Parking lot of building 10.

www.siloinc.org/ada

Upcoming Closures:

Friday, May 22nd – closing at 11 am

Monday, May 25th – Memorial Day

Wednesday, May 27th – Eid al Adha