

SILO Newsletter: February 2026

A Message from the CEO

This message will discuss new initiatives being implemented here at SILO. At times I will discuss advocacy efforts and items of concern that might impact the disability community.

The Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) is a pilot program funded by the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration. In New York State, these funds are administered by the New York State Department of Education (NYSED), Adult Career and Continuing Education Services (ACCES). The goal of SWTCIE is to increase the number of people with disabilities to acquire competitive, integrated employment, and reduce the number of people working in subminimum wage jobs.

SILO was one of the five centers chosen to participate in the NYS SWTCIE pilot program. Suffolk County has over 152 people with disabilities in jobs earning below the minimum wage, with minimal chance of advancement. We were chosen to participate in this innovated program because as an Independent Living Center we are dedicated to ensuring people with disabilities are fully included in all aspects of our society. We also firmly believe people with disabilities can and should live independently in their community and if employed they must be paid a fair, and comparable, wage.

I'm proud to announce that SILO has made the first competitive, integrated placement for an individual who was working in a subminimum wage job. We are the first pilot program, out of the five centers, to accomplish this in New York State. This person will be working in an integrated setting making a salary above the minimum wage.

My congratulations to Greg Runfola, the Director of SILO's SWTCIE program, and Gillean Gradney, the Employment Specialist, for her creativity, persistence, hard work and perseverance to make this placement possible for this individual.

We are determined to continue finding suitable placements for those individuals wishing to leave subminimum wage jobs. We are also committed to stopping the pipeline populating these workshops. Schools are currently the feeders for many of these workshops and that needs to stop. Schools need to make every attempt to find competitive, integrated employment for students with disabilities. This change has already started in many schools. But schools need to aggressively focus on methods and practices of teaching to create and implement suitable and creative curriculums that lead to either career or college pathway for students with disabilities.

Schools must find ways to encourage and support students with disabilities to pursue college courses in their chosen career path and/or secure internships opportunity within the community. Field opportunities that will expose those students to actual work situations. And most important schools must consider and prioritize students with disabilities much like they prioritize the transition and preparation of those students attending 'prestigious' colleges.

Joseph Delgado

Chief Executive Officer

"Dinner in the Dark"

By: Judith Wieber

On Saturday, September 27, SILO sponsored and attended the 6th annual "Dinner in the Dark", hosted by Visually Impaired Persons of Long Island. The event was held at the Holiday Inn in Holtsville. Things opened with a prayer by Tracy Westerlund, VIPS Secretary, giving thanks to God for all we have, and the blessings and talents that have been given to all of us. This was followed by an introduction of the board of directors of VIPS-LI and an enthusiastic talk by Brandon Heinrich, a SILO employee and ADAPT member, who spoke about ADAPT and the advocacy work ADAPT is doing to make the environment more accessible for folks. Many were impacted by his fiery words: "When others say you cannot, I am here to tell you: 'Yes you can!'" I felt invigorated and encouraged by his resounding words.

The next speaker we heard from was Kiana Glanton, wearing her blue sash from her Capable Curves competition, and her baseball cap, standing for the United States Blind Baseball Association's Team USA, of which she is a member. Her accomplishments spoke strongly. Words of her competitive edge stirred up the room of blindfolded and visually impaired diners. She thanked us all for our courage to step out into the unknown. She showed us all how we can be winners, by being confident and taking part in what life has to offer.

The keynote speaker, Michael Kalberer, spoke to the importance of sharing your own personal narrative, for it is through the sharing of our personal experience that we enlighten

and educate others on our needs. He encouraged us to speak from the perspective of strength, to focus on your talents. Applauding everyone in attendance, he recognized everyone who stepped out of their comfort zone for an evening to take on a distinct perspective. To take the time to put themselves into the shoes of the blind and visually impaired means a lot to our community.

Linda Kirk, a former social worker for the Lighthouse and SILO, received the Life Without Boundaries Award for her lifetime of achievement. She was presented with a proclamation set forth by her county legislator. Linda has not only been a social worker for many years, helping those with disabilities, but has led by example: participating in horseback riding, white water rafting, tandem bike riding, aquatics/ water aerobics, spin classes, and singing in her church chorus, just to name a few things she has accomplished. Congratulations Linda!

All enjoyed a scrumptious meal consisting of salad, chicken marsala and/or salmon, mixed vegetables, and baked potatoes, followed by cookies and cake, with a choice of either chocolate or cannoli filling. Raffle tickets were sold, and a 50/50 was held. Aside from eating without seeing, many also tried dancing to DJ Casper's "Cha Cha Slide". Afterwards, anyone who wanted to could then talk about how it felt, dancing and eating a catered meal without their eyesight. Many did not realize how challenging it would be. Many gained a new respect from the experience.

I, too, was thanked with a big, beautiful bouquet of stargazer lilies for brailleing the nights program. Thank you, I loved the bouquet, and I look forward to next year's "Dinner in the Dark", tentatively to be held October 30th. (Yes, you guessed it, talk is spreading of dressing in Halloween costumes.)

Voter Registration Assembly at William Floyd High School

On Monday, January 5th, Marilyn Tucci, Director of Advocacy, worked with staff from the NYS Board of Elections at William Floyd High School to host a voter registration assembly. Students learned why voting matters and how their voices can make an impact. They received hands-on instruction on the new accessible voting machines that are equipped with adaptive features, such as audio and touchscreens, ensuring every voter can cast

their ballot independently and confidently. Students also had the opportunity to register to vote!

“Tee Time”

By: Judith Wieber

I want to let you know of a wonderful experience I just had as a person without vision. I did something recently that I did not think was possible. I attended a golf clinic for blind golfers. When SILO went to the Veterans Administration last October to celebrate “White Cane Safety Day”, my colleagues and I learned that they offer blind Veterans the game of golf as a means of therapy. Golf for the blind? ‘How do they do that?’ I wondered. I wondered so much, I thought I would ask.

The next thing I knew, plans were being made to come back and “see” for ourselves how it is done.

We learned about the different clubs that are used, and the strategy behind each. First, the Driving Iron, used to power the ball up the course, described as giving control and distance, especially in windy conditions. It can send the ball many yards. My mentor and veteran volunteer, Denis, put it in baseball terms: “It carries the ball like a line drive.” The hybrid club, in contrast, will put the ball more in the air in an arc pattern, allowing it to fall shorter. A wood club gives the ball distance and accuracy.

The wedge will pop the ball out of some rough spots. And the putter is used on the greens around the hole to gently putt the ball.

Though we did not meet any of the veterans who are blind and play golf, we did meet with veteran volunteers, coordinators of their vision program, and a golf instructor.

SILO staff, including Marilyn Tucci, Branden Heinrich, and myself, as well as three SILO participants found ourselves on the beautiful greens, decorated by mother nature’s brilliant autumn foliage, as described by our instructor. The warmth of the sun, peaking through the clouds, on my face felt good on the chilly morning. I felt glad to be out in the sunshine, speaking with a kind and understanding veteran volunteer who could not wait for me to try my hand at a sport he himself loves.

The trickling sound of water could be heard as we waited to be brought to a golf cart. We all climbed aboard our golf buggies, as they call them in England, and drove to the zone of the course where we could be instructed and then coached on how to putt the golf ball into the hole. We were shown how to hold the putter and how to practice our swing: Stand with your feet squarely on the ground, slightly wider than our hips; bend the knees and torso; keep the elbows near the body, keeping them straight as you bring the club back. Volunteers

lined us up with the hole each time we tried to get a hole in one. It seems to be all in your stance, and training your muscles, swinging like a pendulum.

As we rode, we passed an impressive monument, engraved with a portrait of veteran John Welch, one of the founders of the golf program at the Veterans Administration.

Three weeks later, we were invited to the Heartland Golf Park in Brentwood. Here, we took to the driving range to learn and practice our swing. It felt so good to make contact and send the golf ball flying through the air. Once hit, the ball would land and then travel through a subway under the grass to pop back up on the tee, ready for us to give another try. I have to say it was lots of fun. Our veteran volunteers and mentors were very accommodating, encouraging, and understanding. I felt so privileged to be receiving aid from those who are continuing to serve and share their love of the sport with us.

“White Cane Day”

By: Judith Wieber

Between 6:30 am and 7:30 am on October 15, a couple of my SILO cohorts and I boarded our S.C.A.T. buses and headed where, you might ask? To SILO? No, to the Veterans Administration Medical Center located in Northport, Long Island.

Why, might you ask? Marilyn Tucci, Brandon Heinrich, and I went to thank and honor wounded American soldiers, who had lost their vision, for their service protecting our freedoms. We also went to celebrate the proclamation Linden B. Johnson made in 1965, commemorating October 15 as a day to recognize the white cane as a tool used for independence.

As our buses dropped us off at the golf clubhouse, Brandon and I unfolded our white canes. Marilyn, guided by Chloe, moved toward the front door. There, we were greeted by many volunteers and service people. As we were guided inside, we were told of the day's activities, beginning with an offer of coffee and pastries. We enjoyed speaking with the veterans, thanking them for their service and talking about what we do at SILO. Then, the ceremony began.

At 9:30 am, we embarked on a golf cart-driven procession to the memorial, “The Wall of Wars”, located near the Vietnam Veterans Garden Walk. There, it was described how the wall represented all the wars the United States had been involved with from the American Revolutionary War to the present-day War on Terror.

The celebration began with Melanie Brodsky, Northport Medical Center Social Worker, speaking on behalf of Dr. Antonio Sanchez, the Veterans Administration Medical Center Executive Director, and the Executive Leadership Team, welcoming us all to “White Cane

Safety Day – 2025”. Brodsky pointed out how the day is dedicated to independence, resilience, and the power of determination. She spoke of how the white cane is a symbol of freedom, representing confidence, courage, and the ability to keep moving forward no matter the obstacles, and how our blinded veterans embody this spirit every day, adapting, learning, and continuing to live with pride and purpose. This was then followed by the reading of the proclamation set forth by President Johnson in 1964:

“A white cane in our society has become one of the symbols of a blind person's ability to come and go on his own. Its use has promoted courtesy and special consideration for the blind on our streets and highways. To make our people more fully aware of the meaning of the white cane, and of the need for motorists to exercise special care for the blind persons who carry it, the Congress, by a joint resolution approved October 6, 1964, has authorized the President to proclaim October 15 of each year as White Cane Safety Day.

“Now, Therefore, I, Lyndon B. Johnson, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim October 15, 1964, as White Cane Safety Day.

“I urge civic and service organizations, schools, public bodies, and the media of public information to join in this observance with appropriate activities designed to promote continuing awareness of the significance of the white cane to blind persons.

“I call upon all our citizens to make every effort to promote the safety and welfare of our blind persons on the streets and highways, and thereby to contribute to their independence of spirit and their capability for self-management.

“In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States of America to be affixed.

“DONE at the City of Washington this sixth day of October in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and sixty-four, and of the Independence of the United States of America the one hundred and eighty-ninth.”

Melanie Brodsky closed by thanking the Veteran Staff, the Rehabilitation Counselors, care givers, and most of all our veterans. We all then returned to the clubhouse for lunch, sponsored in part by the Elks Club.

I thank SILO for the opportunity to be a part of such a celebration, and the opportunity to do my civic duty to share this experience and part of American history with the community of people living with disabilities.

“Positivity”

By: Angel Vasquez

With Thanksgiving behind us, there was usually an expectation that we should all be thankful for something. It can be material wealth or personal wealth. In most cases, it's the former instead of the latter. The topic of material wealth versus personal wealth has been around for quite some time, for it is as old as humanity itself. Which leads us to one critical inquiry: What should we be thankful for? To answer this, one might have to ask themselves a second question: What makes an individual, the brain or the heart? While many are thinking about how much food they will be serving at the dinner table, these questions serve as food for our minds. In my case, I have had to answer these questions by looking within myself, as I have recently made an effort to focus more on the positive rather than the negative. And if you're creative enough, you just might be able to block out most of the negative altogether.

The first major step to positivity is to get out of our own heads. This can be accomplished by doing something you like, or by doing something that is different than what you're doing. Writing is one way that I have been able to break out of my own ruts. I have also developed some other ways as well. For example, one day I came up with an out of the box idea to write a satire play that didn't really require me to think too hard. It allowed me to be creative and to have fun. I was able to be as unorthodox as I wanted to. This provided my mind with the release valve that it needed. Usually when I write about serious material, I am required to utilize and maintain a sense of critical thinking. There are times when my mind became extremely overwhelmed with critical thought. Writer's block and a strong sense of doubt would often cloud my thinking process. Another method that I have used is exploring different topics. Since history is another one of my strong points, I make it a point to expand my horizons. Areas such as science, art, geopolitics, and philosophy have filled gaps in my understanding of the human experience. I even found myself exploring historical topics that were not originally on my radar. Doing this not only cleared my mind; it enhanced my ability to make connections to the areas of history which I had already taught myself about.

When I recently met with my academic coach again, it was different. He was not himself. He revealed to me that one of his cats passed away from cancer. This left him extremely depressed. Additionally, he planned on traveling to France in a few days to visit a family friend but expressed second thoughts. Originally, my academic coach told me that he was going to France anyway because his wife was going. Everyone else was telling him to go on the trip. At that moment, I too advised him to go to France. I reminded him that despite the passing of both one of my dogs and my cockatoo, I understand that life is way too short to be depressed. He told me that I am a wise man. A few days later, he took my advice and went to France with his wife.

Escapism allows us to focus more on the good aspects of our daily lives. Over the weekend, I have made an effort to reflect on the good things that happened to me those days. By doing this, I was able to find yet another way to get out of my own head. Especially if I was able to accomplish certain tasks those days. Once I did this, I made a pledge to myself to do this every day. Such a strategy has proven to be effective for me so far.

Additionally, I have also made an effort to push myself to do the things that I want to do no matter what. Procrastination is not an option in my case. I find that if I always wait for the right time to do something, I will never get around to doing it. That is why I strive to simply get up and do it. This connects directly to our daily lives. For instance, one of my New Year's resolutions was to get in shape. The first step I took was telling my academic coach about my resolution during our first meeting of 2025. He proceeded to generate a list of which foods to eat. I took some time to take it all in. I then advised him to tell my mother about my diet plan. Once the meeting was over, I was excited. I finally had a starting point for my fitness journey. I experimented with his list the next day, learned from the mistakes I made, and revised the list in a way that suits me. To this day, I continue to collaborate with my academic coach on my health.

It is important to treasure every positive experience that comes our way. Otherwise, the negativity will consume us and others. If we are not mindful enough, we can risk pushing those who want what is best for us away. Once this occurs, important social connections and bridges can be destroyed forever. There will be no one left to look out for us when trouble displays its silhouette. One can either learn the hard way or die not trying.

Employee Spotlight:

Kirsten Burchard

We are proud to honor Kirsten Burchard, our NY Connects Assistant Director. Kirsten goes above and beyond to ensure that SILO's mission is authentically provided. She has dedicated many hours to structure and maintain our new HEALI program. She has also taken initiative to create meaningful relationships in the community, which helps keep our food pantry stocked. Thanks for all you do Kirsten!

Kristen Wall

We are proud to honor Kristen Wall for all her hard work! Kristen is a Regional Resource Development Specialist for the NHTD Waiver. Since August of 2024, Kristen has gotten 290+ participants approved for waiver enrollment. She helps in all areas of the waiver and is constantly learning new skills. Thanks for all you do Kristen!

“Creating a Compassionate Mind”

By: Stephanie Dellasperanzo

Do you find it easier to offer supportive words to others than to yourself? Oftentimes, we are unaware of just how self-critical we can be, but with a little reflection, we can begin to change this. Many of us are taught that tough love will help us become better versions of ourselves and propel us through difficulties. This learned voice can become our default inner dialogue without us even realizing it. Speaking to yourself harshly can reduce your self-esteem, heighten stress, and even cause physical discomforts. Thankfully, there are many ways to develop a kinder inner voice, which can improve your overall wellbeing. Practicing self-compassion can help guide you towards a supportive relationship with yourself. Since we spend the most time with ourselves, creating a balanced inner world can be a worthwhile journey.

Making any meaningful change can feel daunting, but starting small and being intentional can make it less intimidating. Tuning into ourselves can be a great starting place, as it helps provide us with a map to guide us towards a more compassionate mind. When we hear our critical inner voice arise, we can pause and reflect on how that criticism made us feel. Stopping to notice how we're speaking to ourselves gives us the chance to notice patterns. Being able to tune into our automatic way of thinking can allow us to gradually change our self-dialogue. Next time you catch yourself being critical of yourself, take a moment to imagine what you would have said to a friend. Often the words we would share with others are comforting, encouraging, and warm. Try offering yourself that same gentle support next time you find yourself caught up in unkind thoughts about yourself. With practice, you can slowly find a balance within yourself that can boost your self-esteem, lower your stress, and help you navigate life's challenges with a supportive inner voice.

Learning to speak to yourself as you would to a friend creates a steady foundation for self-compassion to grow. If this feels challenging to start with, you can try a simple daily practice to help cultivate positive feelings towards yourself. At the end of each day, reflect on three things that you are grateful to yourself for. These can be unique traits of yours, or something from your day that gave you a sense of accomplishment. Even the simplest

acknowledgements can help build a greater sense of self-love and compassion. Over time, this can make speaking to yourself with kindness come more naturally. There are numerous ways to continue expanding that self-kindness, which will look different for every single person. Maybe it's scheduling daily time to just rest, or not saying "yes" to taking on more tasks when you want to say "no." All the little changes can create a softer inner world where compassion can thrive. I encourage you to lean into what brings you joy and find ways to appreciate yourself for being you.

Upcoming Events

Virtual Bingo: 2/10, 2/24, 3/10, 3/24

Visit our website to register and learn more!

www.siloinc.org/events

Upcoming Closures

Monday, February 16th – Presidents' Day

Tuesday, February 17th – Chinese Lunar New Year

Open Positions at SILO

Olmstead Housing Subsidy Housing Specialist – *Housing Department*

Rapid Transition Housing Program Housing Specialist – *Housing Department*

Regional Resource Development Specialist – *Regional Resource Development Center*