

Blind-services center ups fundraising

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September 9, 2012; Page 01B

DAYTONA BEACH -- DAYTONA BEACH - At first glance, **the** only sign of Jennifer Morgan's visual impairment is an attentive yellow lab named Ally sitting calmly at her side.

When she was in her late 50s, Morgan became legally blind from diabetic retinopathy. Before then her degenerative eye condition, caused by diabetes, did not stop her from traveling around **the** country **for** her job as a medical sales representative. But when surgery failed to stop **the** patchy black clouds that obstructed her vision, Morgan was forced to leave her job in Washington, D.C., and move closer to her family in Ormond Beach. Without **the** ability to drive, cook or perform daily tasks on her own, Morgan's independent life became a distant memory.

"I thought I was really going to be in trouble because there were now so many things I couldn't do **for** myself," said Morgan, now 61.

But a doctor's referral to **the Center for the Visually Impaired** in Daytona Beach to attend rehabilitation and vocational classes **for the** blind and visually impaired provided Morgan with a new set of skills and mindset that allowed her to rebuild her life and find steady employment. Recently, **the Center for Visual Impairment** hired Morgan as **the** organization's network community coordinator.

She manages **the** nonprofit's contracts with companies that provide customer-service, call-center jobs to those with visual impairments.

Morgan also works to connect local employers with clients based on their job skills.

"I went from being completely dependent on others and not knowing what to do, to learning how to adapt my skills and live a normal life," Morgan said as she demonstrated magnifying software on her computer that allows her to view spreadsheets.

In 2010, with **the** help of federal stimulus funds, **the** organization established its Job Readiness Training Program that provides work experience, job placement and professional development to **the** visually impaired. But with those one-time funds gone, **the** center is boosting fundraising efforts in order to continue **the** job-training and placement program.

The center, which served 460 clients last year, operates on a \$1 million budget from state and federal grants and private donations. **The** center's clients range from teenagers who were born visually impaired to seniors who are losing their vision and unable to perform simple tasks such as writing checks or reading food labels.

Thinking outside **the** donation box, board members decided to borrow an idea that originated from a blind Swiss minister, Jorge Spielmann, who was known **for** blindfolding dinner guests so that they could better understand his struggles.

On Oct. 17 at **the** Plaza Resort and Spa in Daytona Beach, participants will share a three-course meal in total darkness while deputies from **the** Volusia County Sheriff's Department serve **the** dinner wearing night goggles.

"By dining in **the** dark, people will have **the** opportunity to walk in someone else's shoes," said board member Deanie Lowe. "They will have to rely on sounds, taste and smell to carry on conversations and identify **the** food on their plates."

The event will likely result in a few spills, mix-ups and laughs, which is why Lowe recommends wearing washable clothing.

The effects of empowering individuals with visual impairments are far-reaching, said **Center for Visual Impairment** Executive Director Ronee Silverman. When her clients can live on their own and obtain employment, they are no longer dependent on public assistance.

"We see a 180-degree turn in someone's life after they come here," Silverman said. "If you are living on Social Security payments and being subsidized through Medicaid, you are on **the** receiving end of taxpayers. But once they are able to find work, they are now givers *&^%\$*&^%\$ they are paying taxes and contributing to **the** community."

Cutline: Photo 1: Julienne Messmer, left, supervisor of **the** independent-living program at **the Center for the Visually Impaired**, helps Bob Wimmer learn to use a powerful video magnifier to sign things like checks last week. Other clients in **the** class observe **the** lesson.

Photo 2: Mary Bennett reads with **the** help of a magnifier during Thursday's class.

Photo 3: Jennifer Morgan, community network coordinator, works in her office with her service dog, Ally, last week at **the Center for the Visually Impaired**.

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Photo 4: Volusia County Sheriff Ben Johnson displays one of **the** sets of night-vision goggles he and his deputies will wear while serving dinner in total darkness at a fundraiser Oct. 17 **for the Center for the Visually Impaired** in Daytona Beach at **the** Plaza Resort and Spa. With Johnson are board member Deanie Lowe, left, and Kathy Davis.

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Photo 5: Deanie Lowe

Photo 6: Ronee Silverman