



**EMPOWERING  
THE NEXT  
GENERATION**



The Chicago  
Lighthouse

**the Beam**

Fall 2025





# The Chicago Lighthouse

1850 W. Roosevelt Road • Chicago, IL 60608-1288

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U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit No. 9119  
Chicago, IL

## UPCOMING EVENTS

[chicagolighthouse.org/events](http://chicagolighthouse.org/events)

**Sips & Sweets for Sight**  
**Thursday, February 5, 2026**

**Raising the Stakes for Vision:**  
**Poker & Casino Night**  
**Thursday, February 26, 2026**

**Seeing What's Possible**  
**120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala**  
**Saturday, May 16, 2026**



**DOUBLE YOUR GIFT IN DECEMBER!**  
[See details inside.](#)



**Dear Friends,**

## From the President and Chief Executive Officer —Janet P. Szlyk, Ph.D.

I am often asked where my passion for ensuring members of the blind and visually impaired community have every opportunity available to them comes from.

The answer is my cousin Carol. Carol was born prematurely and lost her vision due to Retinopathy of Prematurity. Growing up, I watched Carol thrive because she had what every child deserves: a loving, supportive family and access to robust support and educational resources.

As a student at Perkins School for the Blind, Carol learned skills such as Braille and orientation and mobility that built her confidence and independence and opened doors for her to become a successful musician, educator and advocate. Carol's journey showed me how important education and community support are in helping a person with a disability reach their fullest potential.

Decades of research affirm Carol's personal story. The most important factors in helping children with disabilities grow into successful, independent adults are early education, strong family support and programs that nurture confidence and self-reliance. The Chicago Lighthouse's Children's and Youth Programs are designed to bring all of these elements together so that children and young adults can have every opportunity

to be as successful and fulfilled as my cousin Carol.

That journey begins in our Birth-to-Three Early Intervention Program, where families find connection and infants learn to explore a world designed for the sighted. It continues in our Children's Development Center, where students build communication, social, and daily living skills through individualized education plans that lay the groundwork for independence. Our Youth Transition Programs then help teens and young adults take their first steps to independence—exploring careers, learning to advocate for themselves, and preparing for life beyond the classroom.

In this issue of The Beam, our stories will reflect on how these programs, families, staff and supporters work independently and together to help children who are blind or visually impaired travel the journey from infancy to adulthood. Working together, we are helping the next generation move beyond barriers and achieve success on their own terms.



Carol and I at the 2014 Sweets for Sight event.

ON THE COVER: Youth participants from this year's Summer in the City program huddle up before exploring Chicago.







# LIGHTING THE WAY FORWARD

Adolescence is an exciting time of life. It is time when you are taking your first steps into independent adulthood. You may be getting a driver’s license and experiencing the freedom that comes with it. You may be looking for a summer or part-time job (to pay for new expenses like car maintenance), and you are likely looking for ways to be away from your parents and family—whom you still love deeply—to figure out who you are, and who you want to be.

For youth with visual disabilities, these experiences can be harder to come by. For many, driving is not an option, or at least not a realistic one at this point. Employers are often reluctant to hire youth with disabilities because of the (generally unfounded) perception of the accommodations they may require, and parents, having spent years looking out for their children in a world not built for them, feel less willing to let go of the reins. *(continued below)*

your resources,” says Lighthouse Senior Vice President of Education **Jordan Owens**.

Those opportunities are all in the name of building participants’ confidence and self-advocacy skills. In the program’s *First Jobs* component, where youth gain work experience through six-week paid internships, job coaching support slowly tapers off over the program’s course, giving participants more opportunities to ask questions, solve problems on their own and advocate for themselves. Similarly, *Photography for All* participants, who explored creative self-expression through accessible digital photography, were each tasked with leading the group on different days to boost their confidence.

We know the program is effective because we ask the participants to evaluate their confidence in performing



**“Preparing for life means preparing to risk failure and use your resources.”**

—Jordan Owens, Senior Vice President of Educational Services

That is why The Chicago Lighthouse’s **Youth Transition Program** is so vital for young adults who are blind or visually impaired. **Over its nearly 10 years of existence, the Youth Transition Program has helped hundreds of adolescents and young adults have the same opportunities to grow, experience a bit more independence than they may be used to, and begin to discover who they want to be as adults.**

The program does this by giving participants the tools they need to succeed, and the space available to fail. “Preparing for life means preparing to risk failure and use

certain tasks, like navigating independently or advocating for themselves, before and after the program. In every case, the survey results show a significant increase in their confidence. Just as importantly, we hear the same from the youths’ parents and teachers.

“Lance has definitely grown more confident after participating in The Lighthouse’s Youth Transition Program,” says Anquil, a parent of one of our former youth participants. “He’s more confident in his classes and with his teachers, and he has definitely been more positive about his future.”



# HELPING GISELLE FIND A CAREER PATHWAY



Prior to the Career Pathways Program, Giselle participated in our Youth Transition Program’s Photography for All session in 2022.

Giselle A. knows the difference a paraprofessional can make in a young student’s life. As a high school student with a visual impairment, Giselle relied on “Mrs. O’Connell,” a paraprofessional aide at Curie High School in Chicago, to make sure classes, assignments and tests were accessible.

“She was always there to make sure I got what I needed,” Giselle says. So, when an opportunity came to learn about becoming a paraprofessional herself through the Career Pathways program, Giselle enrolled immediately. “I had been helped by paraprofessionals myself and thought I could help other students with disabilities learn too,” she says.

School districts around the country are struggling to attract and retain special education staff, including paraprofessionals. The Career Pathways Program is designed to help meet that need.

Last January, Giselle, along with five other students, began a six-month, self-guided, virtual course (created in partnership with Moraine Valley Community College) to help her prepare for the ETS ParaPro Assessment, a certification required to become a paraprofessional aide. The course included weekly reading and online discussions of topics about addressing the needs of students who have different disabilities (and different learning abilities) and how to best address them.

“I learned that students with different disabilities have very different needs, and that they needed different strategies and accommodations to meet those needs,” Giselle says. “There were many things that I was not familiar with.”

Giselle completed the coursework in July and has been working with Youth Transition Program heads Fay Zeigler and Kalari Girtley-Jackson to ensure the test will include the necessary accommodation for her. Her paperwork has been processed, and she expects to take the exam in the coming weeks. Once Giselle passes the exam, The Lighthouse will look to place her in a six-week practicum where she can gain experience that can ideally lead to a permanent position.

## VOLUNTEER DAY GIVES NORTHERN TRUST A CHANCE TO SEE THEIR IMPACT

The Chicago Lighthouse’s relationship with Northern Trust extends back more than 50 years, both as our bank and also as a financial supporter of our programs and services, including the Birth-to-Three Early Intervention Program, comprehensive Low Vision Services and general operations.

Over the past five years, Northern Trust, through its charitable foundation, has supported The Lighthouse’s Youth Transition Program. Through its program elements, particularly First Jobs, Summer in the City and Career Fairs, it aligns well with the foundation’s mission of fostering educational and financial success for youth from Chicago’s South and West sides.

This September, a few Northern Trust employees heard about how the Youth Transition Program assists adolescents and young adults who are blind or visually impaired. As they took a break from stuffing race packets for this year’s Rise to Shine Run & Walk, a group of 12 volunteers heard from Kalari Girtley-Jackson, Assistant Director of the Youth Transition Program.

“I am so glad I have the opportunity to meet you all and thank you in person,” Kalari told the group. “This program is important for these youth because I was once a blind youth myself, and I would have loved to have an opportunity like this to get out of my comfort zone, meet new people and have all of these experiences. At least I’m having them now!”

For more information about corporate partnerships and volunteer opportunities, contact Bryan Anderson at [bryan.anderson@chicagolighthouse.org](mailto:bryan.anderson@chicagolighthouse.org).



Northern Trust volunteers helped us prepare for the Rise to Shine Run & Walk and heard about how their support makes our Youth Transition Program possible.



Your generosity will be matched one-for-one, up to \$25,000, by Chicago Lighthouse board member Richard Schnadig and his wife, Patricia. Use this QR code to make your gift now!



## BIRTH-TO-THREE PROGRAM HELPS PARENTS TOO



Regular readers know I was a student in The Lighthouse's Birth-to-Three Early Intervention Program. While I don't remember much about the experience, my mom, Margarita, and my dad, Armando, do. And they got as much out of the program as I did.

My mom and dad had never really known anyone who is

blind, much less anything about parenting a blind baby. They didn't even know about The Chicago Lighthouse as a resource available to help.

Fortunately, we connected early, and Miss Sharon, my Birth-To-Three Teacher, began coming to our house weekly. While I thought these visits were about fun and play, they had a larger meaning for my parents.

"Miss Sharon would bring all kinds of toys with different shapes, sounds and textures, and you would pick up quickly on all the games," my mom recalls. "Seeing that really gave me a lot of hope and confidence that everything would be ok."

Miss Sharon also helped my dad and my older brother learn how to play with me, which helped our family bond. When I aged out of the program, Miss Sharon made sure I attended a preschool that met my needs as a blind student. Without a doubt, the Birth-to-Three Program had a lasting impact on our family, and we are grateful that it continues to help families like us.

For those who are just beginning your journey with the program, my mom has this advice: take advantage of all it has to offer you, as it will help build a support system that will serve you throughout your lives.

"Get involved with your child's education and with other parents," she says. "This may all be overwhelming at first, but you are your child's best advocate and support."



Sandy Murillo is an Associate Producer at Chicago Lighthouse Media and a graduate of our Birth-to-Three Program. "Sandy's View" is a reoccurring feature in our Beam newsletters.

## A LIFETIME OF BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES



Gail and current student Caleb share a moment.

For more than five decades, Gail Patterson has been the heart of The Chicago Lighthouse's Children's and Youth Programs (and The Chicago Lighthouse), helping hundreds of students with multiple disabilities receive the support and resources they need to thrive on their own terms.

"Although I've seen many changes at The Chicago Lighthouse, I can truly say the dedication and hard work of everyone through the years has remained the same," Gail says. "We continue to strive and make sure our students reach their highest potential. And I'm extremely proud of that."

It's fair to say everyone at The Lighthouse is extremely proud of Gail as well. At an employee recognition event earlier this year, Gail received an extended standing ovation from all in attendance as the organization's longest-tenured employee.

## YOU GIVE SO MUCH. YOU DESERVE SUPPORT TOO.

Caring for a student with a disability takes incredible heart, patience, and resilience. Still, even the strongest caregivers need support sometimes. The Stronger Together initiative at The Chicago Lighthouse offers free mental health support for caregivers living in Cook County—because your well-being matters, too.

Whether you are a parent, grandparent, teacher, social worker, neighbor or have another role caring for a student with a disability, you are at your best when you take care of yourself. Stronger Together is here to help.

We also understand that life's logistics can make it hard to find time for yourself; we have resources to help address barriers like transportation and childcare, so you can take the time to focus on you. You don't have to carry it alone.



**STRONGER  
TOGETHER**



LEARN MORE

**PLEASE CONSIDER A PLANNED GIFT!** Many of our most loyal contributors choose to fund our mission by including The Chicago Lighthouse in their estate plans. Planned gifts offer you the flexibility to maintain your current financial security while also providing long-term support for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, disabled and Veterans. To learn more about estate gift opportunities at The Chicago Lighthouse, **contact Lora Nickels at [lora.nickels@chicagolighthouse.org](mailto:lora.nickels@chicagolighthouse.org) or (312) 997-3643.**