

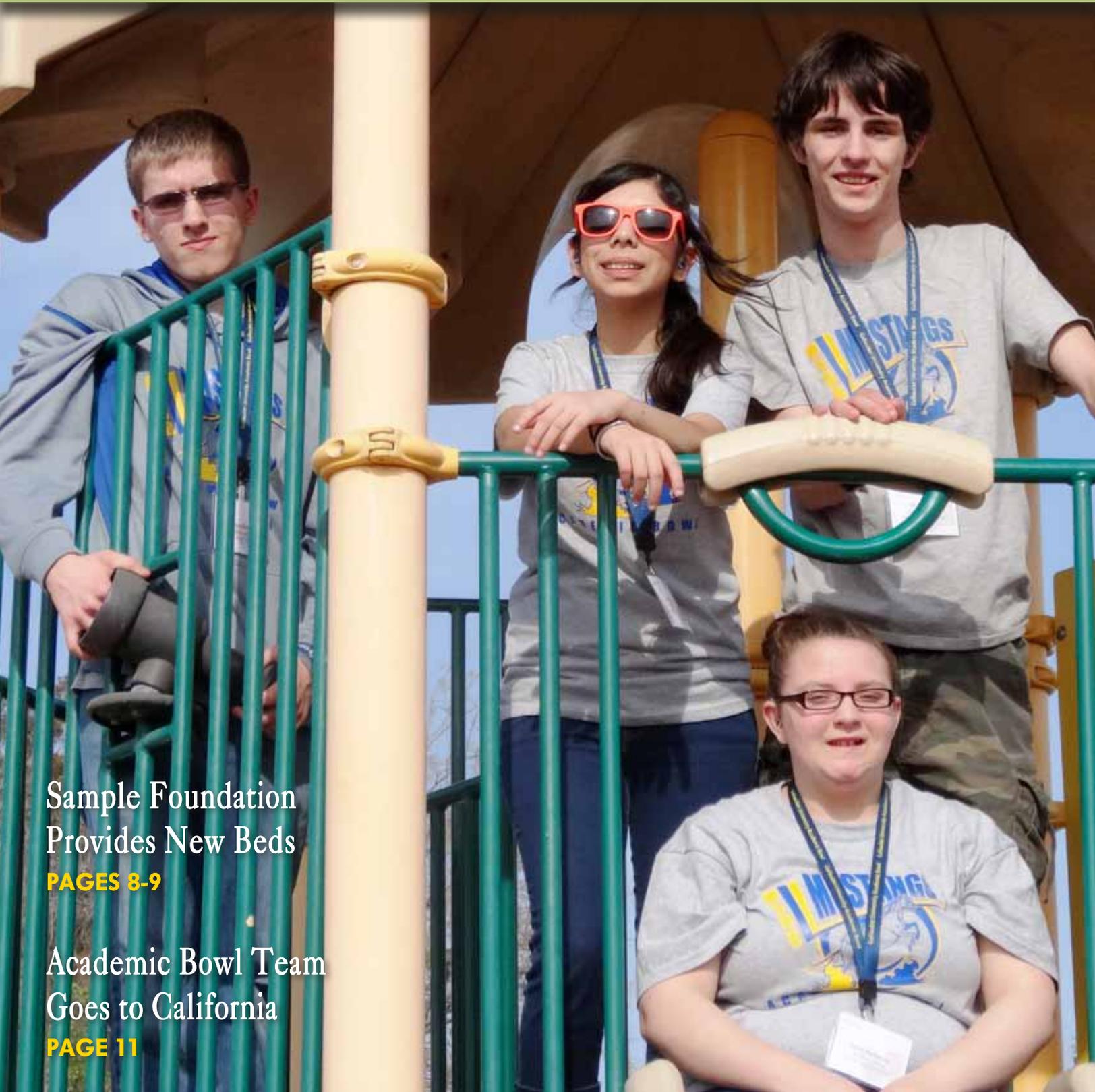


MONTANA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF & BLIND

# Express

giving kids the building blocks to independence

Volume XII, Issue 2, Spring 2014



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Provides New Beds

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# Lisa Cannon Honored

**Kitty Griffin,  
Outreach Consultant**

One of MSDB's own was honored at the Montana Speech Language and Hearing (MSHA) Convention held in Bozeman in October. Lisa Cannon, AuD, Consulting Audiologist with MSDB, was presented with the MSHA Service Award "For her leadership as the Montana Audiology Guild (MAG) president and her time and effort in the planning and execution of the MSHA Fall Convention 2013."

Over the course of the past year, Lisa spent countless hours calling vendors, securing items for door prizes and dealing with the constant barrage of important details required for a convention of that magnitude. According to the MSHA Communicator, 143 Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) and audiologists were in attendance. Thanks to Lisa and her colleagues who planned this annual convention, the busy SLPs and audiologists across the state received training from experts in dysphagia evaluation and treatment, auditory learning, addressing problem behaviors and advances in audiological care.



As those of us who travel in Montana know firsthand, Montana is a vast state and gathering professionals from distant communities is a major undertaking. Lisa and her conference colleagues made certain that these professionals and other attendees were well taken care of, beginning with the check in process and ending with collecting important data sheets so that continuing education units (CEUs) were assigned correctly.

A big thank you to Lisa from the Montana Speech, Language and Hearing Association for all you do. We are proud to count you among our active MSHA members. Your MSDB coworkers are equally proud of you and congratulate you on this award! Way to go, Lisa! ::



**For a wealth of information about MSDB as well as a detailed calendar of the school year, check out our website at:  
[www.msdb.mt.gov](http://www.msdb.mt.gov)**

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# COWBOY CHRISTMAS

Julie-Dee Alt, Supervising Teacher

MSDB's holiday musical production, "Cowboy Christmas," was a real treat. Based on the story *Cowboy Christmas*, written by Rob Sanders, the play showed how a group of cowboys stuck out on the range at Christmastime remembered and celebrated the holiday. The cast was made up of members of Expressions of Silence, the Visually Impaired Performers and many other MSDB students. The students and staff were thrilled to have former teacher and coach Gary McManus return, not only to help direct the program but also to join them on stage as "Cookie," the cowpokes' cook-turned-Santa. Two terrific ladies made an unexpected appearance in the play when they were called out of the audience by Gary who presented them with special gifts. Retiring secretaries Jan Nelson and Bonnie Denoma were each recognized for almost 28 years of service at MSDB and were presented with memory quilts created by current and former staff members. All who were in attendance left with smiles on their faces. Many family members and friends who could not attend the play in person were able to view the live stream of the program over the internet. ❖



ABOVE: Santa (Gary McManus) presents Bonnie DeNoma and Jan Nelson with special gifts during the performance.

LEFT: Directors of "Cowboy Christmas" L-R: Denise Rutledge, Jennifer Wasson, Gary McManus, Dessica McKeehan, Julie-Dee Alt.



Trenton and Anthony wait backstage for their cues.

## Independent Travel Skills at the Christmas Play

**Geri Darko, Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist**

The lights in the Mustang Center signaled, "The show's about to begin." Students in MSDB's production of "Cowboy Christmas" lined up behind the stage in costumes, complete with cowboy hats, bandanas, vests, and boots. The audience may have also noticed the extra tool carried by students with visual impairments: their white canes. Even a familiar setting can present challenges to low vision students once the lights are turned out. Actors and singers from the Visually Impaired Department relied on the white cane to inform them of obstacles,

other actors, the large drop-off at the edge of the stage, and even their special place in each scene. With the overhead lights out and spotlights beaming, students with visual impairments not only showed off their excellent acting skills, but their independent travel skills as well. Students stepped out in front of the audience for the first song, canes centered in front of them, and used wrist movements to arc the cane tip from left to right. All of MSDB's students put on a great performance, thanks to the many staff who helped in the planning and coordinating of the program. We look forward to seeing all of the talent and independence again at the annual Arbor Day Program. ❖

# THE “RBD” IS R-A-D!

Denise Rutledge, Teacher

I know. I know. No one uses the word ‘rad’ (meaning “wonderful”) anymore, but it was the best fit to describe some of the latest technology being used in Aspen Hall! As technology rapidly changes our world each day, we do our best to keep up with those changes in our department for students who are blind or have visual impairments.

Students across the country are accessing their school textbooks in a digital format on electronic tablets. And MSDB is no different. This year, our middle school science class elected to try using the digital format of their textbooks that was made available through the Read2Go app on the iPads.

**Read2Go** is the most accessible e-reader app for people with visual and print disabilities. Within this app, we are able to enlarge the font to a generous 70 pt. font, reverse the contrast, set it to read aloud, and/or read books multi-modally (follow along with a selected highlight color as the app reads aloud). Textbook pictures and graphics are eliminated from this app, but are described in detail to the student in a text format. In addition, this app also pairs nicely with a refreshable braille display, so that students that are blind can read and follow along with the digital text.

What is a refreshable braille display? A RBD (as acronymed by the students), is an electro-mechanical device that displays braille by pushing rounded pins up through holes (in the 6-dot braille cell configuration). RBDs can display anywhere between 8 to 80 cells at a time. As a student advances in the text, the pins change (or “refresh”) to form new words. Many RBDs work in conjunction with screen readers and other speech output devices. When using the iPad, the RBD is paired with the included Apple screen reader, VoiceOver.

The use of Read2Go and the RBD (the Focus40 model,



Anthony Cox uses a refreshable braille display paired with an iPad to read his science text.

in this case), have given the students timely access to current textbooks without inhibiting their ability to develop literacy. Students can both ‘read’ (traditional, large print or embossed material) and listen to the text being read.

With such a successful trial run of using digital textbooks, we will be sure to investigate additional opportunities to encourage the use of this technology. Our experiences so far have left us saying, “This tech is RAD!” ❖



Twyla, Katie, and Trevin act out the Revolutionary War.

Debi Knuth, Teacher

In our fifth grade Social Studies class in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Department, we studied the Revolutionary War and how our great country became the United States. We learned that early Americans wanted freedom from the King of England. We re-enacted the Boston Tea Party by dressing as Indians

## ACTING OUT HISTORY

and throwing many boxes of English Tea in Boston Harbor. We also acted like Minute Men who were Patriots that were ready to fight the British soldiers within a minute. After many battles in the colonies, the King of England gave us the right to be Americans. We continue to live with the same rights and freedoms that were started 239 years ago along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean.



Students gather to thank Patty Myers for all she has done for them through the years.

# Farewell to Four Fabulous Ladies

**Steve Gettel, MSDB Superintendent**

We are fortunate to have many long time employees and members of the board in our MSDB family. And from time to time we have to say goodbye as they retire from the school. This past December Jan Nelson, Education Secretary, and Bonnie DeNoma, Executive Secretary, retired after 28 years of dedicated service to the students, parents and staff of MSDB. Over the years their professional assistance with the management of our programs was only matched by their care and dedication to the students and staff who work here.

Cheryl Devine retired after eight years as the Executive Secretary for the MSDB Foundation. Cheryl went beyond her role of providing support to the Foundation Board by developing

a deep understanding of the needs of our students and advocating for the school and Foundation.

In January Patty Myers retired after serving 14 years on the Board of Public Education (BOPE). Patty served as the chair of the board and its MSDB committee but also had a relationship with MSDB for more than 20 years before becoming a member of the BOPE. Patty was a teacher at Lewis and Clark Elementary School, where many students from MSDB are mainstreamed, so she had experience teaching students with vision and hearing loss. Patty is an avid supporter and loyal friend of MSDB.



Kim Schwabe, MSDB Principal, presents Patty with thank you card.

On behalf of the students, parents and staff I want to congratulate all of you on your well deserved retirement and express

our gratitude for your selfless service. You will always be remembered and welcome at MSDB.☐☐

## A FAREWELL FROM JAN

I have enjoyed the many years I have worked at MSDB. My time at MSDB began when my family and I moved to Great Falls when my daughter, Christie, started school here in 1985. I first worked as a teacher assistant substitute and was asked to sub for the education secretary, where I ended up staying for the last 27 years. This has been a perfect job for me as it has never gotten old. There is always something new coming my way, from back in the old days being asked to taste sour milk for milk and cookies to helping out on the senior trip in Florida and all the technology/changes in between. As with any job it has had its moments but I have truly been blessed to have held this position and be a part of MSDB. My desire was to do my job to the best of my ability and I hope I accomplished that goal, which is all due to my great co-workers who have made MSDB a terrific school and home away from home. Meeting all the staff and students who have come and gone throughout the years will be my most treasured memories and of course that is what I will miss the most, you all have truly touched my heart.

I am looking forward to my retirement, to new adventures such as traveling, time with my kids and grandkids, quilting, biking, and the list continues. Thank you, MSDB, for a great career!

## A FAREWELL FROM BONNIE

Twenty-seven plus years of employment serving Montana's sensory impaired kids and their parents has given me many wonderful memories to cherish. I have watched so many students grow up here, graduate and go on to become successful, productive adults. And now I'm seeing former students bringing their kids to MSDB as well.

Starting here in August of 1986 with Pete Gebo and Susan Reavley was a wonderful start to my new career. This was during a time when the cottages were full and I was "hit head on" with the kids signing to me and my struggling attempt to communicate with them. After two years at the Dean's office, I transferred to the administration office. During those early days, there was no voice mail, no cell, no computer, no fax, no scanner, just the old typewriter, copier, and carbon paper. The half sheet MSDB memo pads were our emails. Life does change, doesn't it?

Retirement will include some days sitting in front of a fire and sipping a mug of coffee when it's -20 degrees outside, traveling near and far, getting in some cross country skiing, camping, cleaning a house from top to bottom, and the list goes on.

This closes with much heartfelt appreciation and gratitude for the privilege of working here and getting to know all of the students, their families and the staff and their families over the years. I may be gone but there will always be a big piece of my heart staying at MSDB.





# Montana School *for the* HELP US GIVE KIDS THE BUILD



## SAMPLE FOUNDATION GIVES KIDS NEW BEDS

“Sleeping in my own bed” – that is how we often describe the good feeling of being at home after a time away.

Residential students at the Montana School for the Deaf & Blind each have two “homes” and two beds – one in their hometown, where their family lives, and one on campus in Great Falls, where they spend most of the school year. The school provides all of its services, including room and board in the cottage, at no cost to families, and it cannot afford to replace cottage furnishings often. As a result, things like mattresses deteriorate over time and are not as comfortable as they could be.

Thanks to the Sample Foundation,

LEFT: Jesse looks forward to his first night in his new bed.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

With your help, the MSDB Foundation has been able to provide funds for services and equipment for the students at MSDB for over 30 years. The Foundation is committed to funding academic

and extracurricular activities that help prepare students for independent lives. Please join us in that commitment by making a tax-deductible donation at [www.justgive.org](http://www.justgive.org) or mailing it to: ➡

# Deaf & Blind Foundation

## BUILDING BLOCKS TO INDEPENDENCE

MSDB students now have comfortable new mattresses to sleep on. This way, they won't mind sleeping away from their first home as much, and may feel like they are sleeping in their "own" beds even while away at school.

The MSDB Foundation strives to help make kids feel at home on campus, and through building partnerships with generous organizations like the Sample Foundation, we are able to provide amenities the students would otherwise not be able to have. The MSDB Foundation is working to raise funds to update the remaining furniture in the cottage, much of which is 30 years old, as well as the paint and wallpaper.

The new mattresses will be put to another important use this summer when children from all over Montana come to campus for MSDB's summer camps and other programs. A camp for deaf and hard of hearing students



Blair gets help moving her new mattress into her room.

and one for blind and visually impaired kids provide the only opportunity many of these young people have to be around others like them. They have fun while learning skills to increase their independence. MSDB provides similar skill-building opportunities on select weekends during the school year, as well as Family Learning Weekends, the Visually Impaired Games, and other activities. Children and their families from around the state who attend these wonderful events will now have more comfortable accommodations. And families who are considering sending

their children to MSDB full-time will have an easier time envisioning their kids sleeping away from their own beds.

The Sample Foundation has provided funds for a number of projects at MSDB over the years. The school staff and students join the MSDB Foundation in a big "Thank you!" for their support and for a great night's sleep. ❖

## MSDB Foundation

P.O. Box 6576 | Great Falls, MT 59406  
For more information, please call 406-771-6040

***"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."***

*~Helen Keller*



Tanner, Kaylee, Miss Montana Sheridan Pope, Emmalynn, Tayten, Blaine, and Sue Roller end the day with a group photo after an afternoon of fun!

## Location, Location, Location!

**Emily LaSalle, Outreach Consultant**

**M**SDB's Outreach teams do an amazing job offering enrichment weekends to the students of Montana on our Great Falls campus. Both our outreach and campus students benefit from the activities and the relationships that develop from intermingling with each other.

For our students in Eastern Montana the long trek to experience the weekend is not plausible. What's a consultant to do to provide the social benefits of bringing deaf and hard of hearing students together to enjoy each other's company in rural Eastern Montana? Bring an enrichment afternoon to Sidney and invite students from neighboring communities! This past December children and adults enjoyed decorating cookies (special thanks to Teri in the MSDB kitchen for the cookies and frosting!), engaged in astounding science experiments (Thanks, Tyler Hansen, for the mind boggling experiment!), played games with a holiday twist and thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. The best part of the day was the connection between the students; the staff of the Sidney district; Sue Roller, audiologist; Sheridan Pope, Miss Montana, and myself.

How lucky am I to have such a team as the special education director (Michelle Monsen), the speech and language pathologist (Lisa Christensen), preschool teacher (Darci Haraldson) and principal (Mr. Skinner) all come together to benefit our students in Sidney and the surrounding communities! Thank you to all of you in Eastern Montana that give so much of yourselves to serve each and every child in your districts. Your hard work and dedication is greatly appreciated! ■■

## Bal- Balance, A- Auditory, Vis-Vision, X- Exercise

**Kerri Norick, Outreach Consultant**

**N**ow put it all together and you get Bal-A-Vis-X. I was recently granted approval to attend the Bal-A-Vis-X training course in Manhattan, MT, in February. This course was 17 hours of intense Balance, Auditory and Vision exercises, and I learned a total of 15-20 exercises. The Bal-A-Vis-X website gives the following explanation of the program:



*The whole curriculum of Bal-A-Vis-X is a series of some 300 exercises, most of which are done with sand-filled bags and/or racquetballs, often while standing on a Bal-A-Vis-X balance board. These exercises require thousands of mid-line crossings in three*

*dimensions. The exercises are steadily rhythmic, with a pronounced auditory foundation, executed at a pace that naturally results from proper physical techniques. Bal-A-Vis-X enables the whole mind-body system to experience the symmetrical flow of a pendulum.*

So, you are probably asking yourself, "Why would a teacher of the visually impaired want to attend a training that requires vision?" Well, in order to be a successful learner, we all need to use and maintain our proprioception and vestibular systems. Proprioception is "the sense of where all body parts are in relation to each other" or "the process by which the body can vary muscle contraction in immediate response to incoming information regarding external forces." The Vestibular system is the sensory system that provides the leading contribution about movement and sense of balance or "a sense of where you are in relation to gravity." Using vision for some of my students is not applicable but for my low vision students, we will work on tracking exercises. I have been very interested in the whole mind-body system for years, and now I am prepared to start teaching the Bal-A-Vis-X exercises to my students. ■■

# MSDB Students Compete in Academic Bowl in California

**Debi Knuth, Teacher**

With enthusiasm, nerves and excitement, Jasmine, JG, Austin and Sarah arrived at Great Falls International Airport at 4:30 a.m. on Valentine's Day for their flight to sunny, warm California. As MSDB's Academic Bowl team, they were headed to the California School for the Deaf, Riverside to compete with 18 other Deaf schools in the Western Region. The students spend several months preparing for this important event.

Due to an early landing, we had time to go SHOPPING! With 12 main entrances, the biggest mall we have ever seen just happened to be close to the airport. With over 400 stores to choose from, we spent a fraction of our millions on presents for family. Tired and hungry, we ate at an original restaurant, Rainforest Café, decorated in jungle motif. We enjoyed eating while watching and listening to jungle sights and sounds.

Although a little apprehensive, our students quickly became friends with competitors from Wyoming, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and California. Now the excitement begins—The Matches. It's at this time the nerves and anxiety occur. Competitions are very serious and even though there were some disappointments, our MSDB team was diligent and hard working during their games. Coaches Wasson and Knuth were and are very proud of their team's performance.

In addition to the competition, the Academic Bowl included a fun activity for all the students – a rock climbing expedition. In harnesses, they climbed to the top with scratched knuckles, scraped knees and sore muscles. It was an exciting time for participants and spectators.

Sunday was the final day for



Academic Bowl Team, students left to right: Jasmine, JG, Austin, and Sarah.  
Coaches: Debi Knuth and Jennifer Wasson

competition, with the championship games in the evening. Loads of smiles and last minute pictures filled the room. It was a time for kids to exchange e-mail addresses, promises to keep in touch and last farewells to lifetime friends.

Before heading home, the MSDB group enjoyed a hilarious "fun day" at Universal City. Every one of us had a terrific time challenging the Transformers, meeting T-Rex, screaming at the Mummy, and laughing with Homer Simpson. Thrills and chills best describe our adventure at this awesome film studio. Eating at the Hard Rock Café was a great experience, too. The food and atmosphere were delightful.

The entire trip was wonderful, and sharing this experience with four young adults was amazing. Coach Wasson and Coach Knuth would like to give a special thanks to the MSDB Foundation, MSDB staff and students, and all the parents and friends for their support and encouragement of our Academic Bowl team. Your confidence inspires us to our best. Thank you ever so much. ❖

## WHAT'S COOKIN'?

Chicken Enchiladas! Nick, a sophomore at Plentywood High School, spent a free afternoon during parent-teacher conferences with Outreach



Consultant, Emily LaSalle. Together they made chicken enchiladas; Nick volunteered to clean up my computer (anyone out

there with a computer internship for a talented high school student this summer?) and we attempted to play scrabble with SAT preparatory vocabulary. Thank you Nick for a fun afternoon! ❖

# Making Math Meaningful

Leann Goss, Teacher

One of the most important jobs teachers have is to find ways of making learning meaningful to students. This is especially true for our preschool and Kindergarten students. One way of making math meaningful is to count the days we come to school. Each day we add one more penny to a jar, one more stick to a bundle, one more number to a number line. All of these ways of counting happen every day we come to school, and we start to see patterns in numbers. We make counting sticks and pennies easier by making groups or changing out 10 pennies for a dime. Well, February 4th was the 100th day of school for the 2013-2014 school year. Our young students celebrated this triple digit day in many fun and yummy ways!

The students in the Visually Impaired Department participated in a variety of activities. Miche Jarvey's class practiced being quiet for 100 seconds. A hard task for her energetic boys! They also drew a picture of what they'd buy with \$100. Denise Rutledge's Low Vision Technology class estimated how full various containers would be if they were filled with 100 Cheerios. They then counted out the Cheerios and tested their theories. They also typed up their journal writings on what would be different in the world 100 years from now. They listened to a variety of 100th day books on audio, as well. The preschool class and kindergarten class made a homemade pizza with 100 pepperonis on it! They rolled dough, slopped sauce around, shredded cheese, and counted pepperonis. They had 6 little hands helping with every step (as well as providing quality control on all aspects of the process). Their 100-pepperoni pizza was delicious! ❖



In the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Department, Levi, J, and Bridger brought in different snacks (Craisins, fish crackers, M&M's, teddy grahams, etc.) to make 100 days Trail mix. Each student counted out 10 pieces of 10 different snacks to make their trail mix. It was a colorful, yummy treat!



Also in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Department, Tyler and Charlee sorted their Zero cereal by colors. Then they counted 10 of each color and strung them to make a necklace of 100 zeros!



Hayden, Jesse, and Blair rest a spell (left) while Angelina skis independently (below).



## Ski Day at Showdown

The students enjoyed their annual day of skiing, snowboarding, and snowshoeing at Showdown Resort! The weather could not have been better. The snow conditions were great and the skies were blue and sunny. MSDB Staff and Eagle Mount of Great Falls had most students skiing independently by the end of the day! Great fun was had by all. ❖

# WELCOME TO MSDB

## Meet Our New Executive Secretary, Paula Mix

**M**y family and I arrived in Great Falls at the end of January. We are excited to finally be back in Montana after living the past 15 years in the Salt Lake City suburb of Kaysville, Utah. We are Montana natives from the Missoula area who have finally been afforded the opportunity to return as the result of my husband Steve being called as the new Senior Pastor of the Fairview Baptist Church. Prior to this he was a Pastor of the Kaysville Bible Church for 15 years. During our time in Utah I held two positions. My most recent position was as an Administrative Assistant at the Davis Applied Technology College - a post I held for three years. Prior to that I worked at Christian Heritage High School in Riverdale, Utah, as their Registrar. Both positions have prepared me well for my new position here at MSDB. I am so thankful to be able to remain in the same field and work within this great school community.



Just a little about our family: As expected, our day to day family life centers around church and school. Our son Tyler, 16, is a Junior at the church-owned Treasure State Academy. He especially loves being back in Montana for the many outdoor activities simply not afforded to city people. We have two daughters, both in full-time Christian service. Lynnette, 25, is a pastor's wife and ER nurse in Elkins, WV, and Melissa, 23, is a junior high school teacher at Greater Beckley Christian School in Beckley, WV. When we are

afforded some recreational time we love to all meet at Flathead Lake. Steve's dad has a property there and we so much enjoy meeting up with our family members still in Missoula.

I would like to thank everyone that has so warmly welcomed me to MSDB. I know already that I am home in more ways than one. ❖

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## Meet our New Education Secretary, Judy Scharhag!

**I** was born in Illinois, but grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My husband's name is Steve and he grew up in Wisconsin. We both have children from a previous marriage (Brian, Jennifer, and Jessica), and then Steve and I have a son, Justin. We also have three grandchildren, Tanner, Payton and Abigail.

We enjoy camping and hiking. I enjoy building and working with wood, electrical wiring, puzzles, and Sudoku. I have also been a musician for over 40 years. I am a drummer and currently play two Sundays a month at my church. I am very involved with our son's boy scout troop. Before coming to Great Falls, I lived in Ellensburg, Washington, for four years and Wiesbaden, Germany for four years.❖



# SUPPORTING ONE ANOTHER

Sharon Woods, Outreach Consultant

**A**s outreach professionals working with children who are visually impaired and their families, we have had the honor of entering many homes and working with wonderful families throughout our large and wonderful state. After years of such visits, I began to notice a similarity in feelings and stories. Many families felt that they were the only ones going through all the emotions, trials and celebrations that were unique to raising a child with sensory and sometimes other challenges as well. I began obtaining permission from each parent to share their contact information with others. Thanks to some very supportive parents/caregivers, a support group was formed. Many different meeting places were tried and now the group has a home at Easter Seals Goodwill in Billings. The group is open to all families in Montana with children with visual impairments. A wonderful side effect of the group is that the children have been able to meet each other and spend time together. This Montana group also has a Facebook page called: Kids with

Visual Impairments in Montana. So, if you live too far away to join us in Billings, please join us on Facebook. If you happen to be in Billings on the second Saturday of the month between 10 AM and noon, please drop in and say hello!

These are some other resources for family support:

[www.familyconnect.org/parentsitehome.aspx](http://www.familyconnect.org/parentsitehome.aspx)  
Wonderful support plus lots of ideas!

[www.afb.org/messageboards.aspx?MBTopicID=3482&MBFolderID=4](http://www.afb.org/messageboards.aspx?MBTopicID=3482&MBFolderID=4)

[www.spedex.com/napvi](http://www.spedex.com/napvi)

[www.facebook.com/FamilyConnect](http://www.facebook.com/FamilyConnect)

**Montana Kids with Visual Impairments Facebook page:** [www.facebook.com/groups/126811920770747/503522583099677/?notif\\_t=group\\_activity](http://www.facebook.com/groups/126811920770747/503522583099677/?notif_t=group_activity)  
Just ask to join! ❖

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## Third Grade Paleontologists



Faybion: "It was fun looking for the cookies in the dirt. I liked using the paintbrushes to find the fossils."

**Amanda Taylor, Teacher**

**O**ver the last few weeks, our 3rd grade science class has been studying fossils. Throughout the unit, they learned fossil-related vocabulary (such as "fossil," "fossil fuels," "imprint," "trace," and "bone") and learned how fossils are made, what fossils can tell us about the past, and how we use fossil fuels. To complete our unit on fossils, students were given the opportunity to become paleontologists for the day. The students were given a box filled with dirt and told they would be paleontologists who had to look for fossils. Our fossils were chocolate chips inside cookies. The students were given

paintbrushes to brush through the dirt to find the fossils and toothpicks to dig out the fossils, or chocolate chips. Then we put on our thinking caps and used the scientific method to determine which type of cookie the chocolate chips were easiest to extract from. The students discovered that it is easier to extract fossils from soft objects rather than hard ones, as the hard cookies were difficult to extract the chocolate chips from without breaking the rest of the cookie. We had a blast!

Here are some thoughts on the unit from the students:

**Blair:** "It was cool digging out the fossils or chocolate chips."

**Jesse:** "It was fun! I showed the cottage what we did." ❖

# Impressive Orientation & Mobility Conference

**Geri Darko, Certified  
Orientation & Mobility Specialist**

In December, I had the pleasure of attending the AER International Orientation & Mobility Conference in New Orleans. AER stands for the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired. The conference was an amazing four days filled with O&M-related topics and the best of New Orleans' culture, music, and food! Statistics from this conference are impressive:

- New Orleans was the 1st O&M focused conference in 10 years!
- 740 attendees
- 30 exhibitors
- 130+ presenters
- 46 states were represented with at least 1 representative from Washington D.C., Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands
- Seven countries were represented
- Many professionals from various organizations were in attendance, including Teachers of the Visually Impaired and Certified Orientation & Mobility specialists (TVI/COMS), physical therapists, occupational therapists, university professors, researchers, superintendents from schools for the blind, university students in COMS programs, and others.

Orientation & mobility is still a young profession – formal training in the area of independent travel began at Valley Forge Army General Hospital in 1943. During the New Orleans conference, new information was presented about topics ranging from O&M with preschoolers to independent travel in adulthood and improving cane techniques to working with dog guide users.



Geri Darko attends conference in New Orleans.

Some sessions focused on new research being done in the field. An interdisciplinary team from the National Eye Institute is researching street crossings at intersections with roundabouts. This is an interesting topic to me because the first roundabout was just installed in Great Falls less than a year ago. There are several new implementations for improving accessibility at roundabout street crossings for visually impaired pedestrians. The latest research focuses on which implementations are the most effective for slowing or stopping motorists and ensuring the safest crossings for pedestrians. The research on this topic is ongoing. I hope that these options for accessible roundabouts will be implemented at roundabouts near our students soon!

If you are reading this article, you may have some knowledge about white canes for visually impaired travelers. Have you ever heard of a green cane or a blue cane? What about leopard print canes? If a traveler uses a cane of a different color in public, will that cane still be recognized as the tool of a person with a visual impairment? Will that person still be protected under the state's white cane laws? Researchers at Northern Illinois University are

studying these very questions. At the time of this research, drivers did not consistently identify pedestrians with canes of other colors as persons with a visual impairment. Is individuality and self-expression worth the risk of one's safety? There has not yet been enough research conducted to make any conclusions and I'm sure we haven't heard the last of this topic.

Since my return from New Orleans, I've already begun to put some new ideas into practice with students at MSDB. I am participating in a study on improving cane techniques through San Francisco State University. Exercises at the beginning of individual O&M lessons prime the student to use the correct arm position and wrist movement for the most efficient and effective cane techniques while walking.

I have also implemented several new lessons to help students improve problem solving skills while traveling. These problems may range from becoming disoriented during a route, taking a wrong turn, or missing the intended destination. During these lessons, students are learning to recognize their problem, assess the situation, gather and interpret information, and create a plan to help solve the problem. The purpose of these activities is to lessen the anxiety when problems arise, encourage a variety of problem solving strategies, and help students travel confidently, even in troublesome situations.

I am so grateful to MSDB for allowing me the opportunity to attend the conference. Because of the rich information I received, I feel very enthusiastic about helping my students improve their cane techniques, learn better problem solving strategies, and continue to strive for safe, efficient, and independent travel throughout their lives. ■■



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FOR THE DEAF & BLIND

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# MSDB Summer Programs... Hope to See You There!

**MSDB** offers a variety of enriching summer programs for children and their families. *Family Learning Weekends* offer opportunities for families to draw support from one another as well as from MSDB staff and other experts. *Summer Camps* are a chance for kids who attend school in their home communities and those who attend MSDB to come together for a week to socialize with their peers, develop independence, and learn new communication and technology skills.



## FAMILY LEARNING WEEKENDS

One Family Learning Weekend is designated for families of deaf and hard of hearing children, and one is for families of blind and visually impaired children. These popular weekends include dynamic national speakers and a wealth of information on learning to relate to a child's disability. The weekend provides opportunities for families to learn about their child's sensory impairment, share their experiences with other families, and communicate with one another in a warm and caring atmosphere.

**Learning Weekend for the Blind/VI: June 6-8, 2014**

**Learning Weekend for the Deaf/HOH: June 13-15, 2014**



## SUMMER CAMPS

Week-long camps for children who are Blind and Low Vision, or children who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing are offered to students from across the state and offer skill-building in the key areas of communication, social interaction, independent

living, and the use of technology.

The camps include structured leisure and recreational activities, including trips to the local water park, Great Falls White Sox baseball games, and exploring the historical, art and children's museums in Great Falls. The Montana School for the Deaf & Blind has a complete recreation complex where campers swim, bowl, and enjoy other group activities. For the blind and visually impaired students, learning these activities can be powerful accomplishments.

**Summer Camp for the Deaf/HOH: June 15-21, 2014**

**Summer Camp for the Blind/VI: July 13-19, 2014**

The Montana School for the Deaf & Blind provides room, board, entertainment, and transportation to and from the Great Falls campus at no cost to the student. Summer programs are co-sponsored by MSDB, the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI), and the MSDB Foundation. ■■

***For more information please visit the MSDB website [www.msdb.mt.gov](http://www.msdb.mt.gov). Click on Campus, then Summer Programs. You will find further explanation of each event along with applications and program booklets. For additional information you can also call MSDB at 1-800-882-MSDB or email us at [info@msdb.mt.gov](mailto:info@msdb.mt.gov).***