

# 2019 Helen Keller Achievement Awards and AFB Leadership Conference Summary Report

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Organization Strategy vs. Network Strategy



**February 27 – March 1, 2019**

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**Crystal Gateway Marriott**

**AFB** American Foundation<sup>®</sup>  
for the Blind

Expanding possibilities for people with vision loss

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## Thanks to your generous support, we had another successful Helen Keller Achievement Awards (HKAA) and AFB Leadership Conference (AFBLC) in Arlington, Virginia!

The [Helen Keller Achievement Awards](#) was held on the eve of the conference, and it was wonderful to kick things off with a celebration of diversity and inclusion. We heard incredibly moving (and funny) speeches from our award recipients—Peter Korn, director of accessibility at Lab126 for Amazon; Alleace Gibbs, vice president of communications for Northrop Grumman’s Technical Services sector; and Washington State Lt. Governor, Cyrus Habib. The room was filled with AFB staff, trustees, and guests of our sponsors: Amazon, JPMorgan Chase & Co., Hewlett Packard Enterprise, the Delta Gamma Foundation, Google, The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation, Lee Hecht Harrison, Northrop Grumman, Vanda Pharmaceuticals, APH, Fannie Mae, Microsoft, Sprint, Facebook, Challenger, Gray, and Christmas, UPS Foundation, T-Mobile, Korn Ferry, Willis Towers Watson, Anthem, Cigna, CBS, Deloitte, Oracle, PwC, and SIRVA.



*Photo 1 (from left): Peter Korn, Alleace Gibbs, and The Hon. Cyrus Habib with their awards*

We are also grateful to our attendees, sponsors, co-hosts, presenters, exhibitors, and volunteers who made this year’s AFBLC another outstanding event. More than 400 attendees from 43 states and three countries and territories joined us for 40 distinct

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learning opportunities over two days, which included 35 breakout sessions, three general sessions, and an AbilityOne Commission public meeting. We also held an all-day preconference Older Individuals Who Are Blind Program Managers meeting with 60 participants. We had a wonderful array of exhibitors, engaging and inspiring keynote presenters, and had four opportunities to bestow prestigious awards to recognize the contributions and achievements of accomplished professionals. Dr. Michele McDonnell, director of the National Research and Training Center (NRTC) on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University, received the Corinne Kirchner Research Award, and Anita Shafer Aaron received the Stephen Garff Marriott Award.

Highlights from Thursday included a riveting and inspirational opening keynote presentation delivered by adventurer and author, Erik Weihenmayer, who is the first blind person to summit Mount Everest. This multimedia session was live audio described, thanks to Washington Ear. This allowed for live description of video clips and images for attendees with visual impairments via special audio listening devices with headsets. The NRTC on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University held its State of the Science employment research conference in conjunction with the AFBLC to report on research findings related to preparing people with visual impairments for employment. And thanks to the generous sponsorship of the Leadership Track by Hewlett Packard Enterprise, experienced presenters were brought to the conference to emphasize the importance of networking, collaboration, and effective leadership skills.

The conference closing general session featured a panel of esteemed disability inclusion evangelists from the corporate sector, including Jim Sinocchi of JPMorgan Chase & Co., Lori Golden of EY, Chris Rice of Lee Hecht Harrison, and Russell Shaffer of Walmart. They spoke about the future of work, implications for those with disabilities, and the growing trend of hiring employees with disabilities.

The Migel Medal was presented to Dr. J. Elton Moore, professor emeritus and former director of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University, and Glinda Foster Hill, education program specialist at the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Division of Research to Practice





*Photo 2 (left to right): Dr. Elton Moore, Dr. Michele McDonnell, AFB President and CEO Kirk Adams, and Glinda Hill*

For the first time, a conference app was offered and widely embraced. Audio beacons were provided by Foresight Augmented Reality; this allowed visually impaired users to navigate the conference area, hotel, and local business environments while receiving confirmation of their locations via a free app.

For additional conference highlights, check out the [AFB twitter feed](#) and the hashtag [#AFBLC19](#) for a recap of the conference events, including sessions.

Many thanks to our AFBLC sponsors: Mississippi State University, Amazon, JPMorgan Chase & Co., Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Delta Gamma Foundation, Google, Lee Hecht Harrison, Vanda Pharmaceuticals, APH, Fannie Mae, Microsoft, Sprint, Facebook, Kalamuna, Albertson's, Charter Communications, Meridian Compensation Partners, T-Mobile, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, and HumanWare.

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We received an enthusiastic response to this year's conference. Here are some of the comments shared with us:

"The conference was meaningful on many levels—near perfect from my learning experience. AFB's staff talent, engagement, commitment, and leadership were shining throughout like a constellation! Congratulations to each staff member and all the best in 2019 as AFB continues to partner with others to create a world of no limits!"

"It was an honor to attend the conference. The event was extremely well organized, the content was very valuable, and I found it so inspiring on a personal level."

"I found the conference overall to offer great insights with practical information that can be used on a day-to-day basis. I look forward to the opportunity to come again next year!"

"I was honored to be among such high-caliber presenters. There is much I am already integrating into my work, and I was genuinely impacted by the keynotes' principles of leadership and systems change. The conference was a gift."

"This was my first AFB Leadership Conference, and I have definitely bumped it to the top of my must-attend list next year. I found it very well-organized, well-managed, responsive to feedback, helpful, informative, and fun. I had several members of my organization attend, and they all expressed the same and found it an invaluable tool for leaders. See you next year. I enjoyed the experience and look forward to more opportunities to learn and lead together."

Please mark your calendars now for the 2020 HKAA gala and AFBLC, which will again be held at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, VA. The gala will take place on Wednesday, March 25. The conference will be held Thursday, March 26, and Friday, March 27. If you are interested in sponsorship, advertising, or exhibiting opportunities, please contact Amanda Kolling ([akolling@afb.net](mailto:akolling@afb.net)). We look forward to seeing you again next year!