Short classes, big impact

Throughout the year, students with visual impairments socialize, learn new skills and embrace their passions through condensed, impactful courses.

The timbre of learning, pg. 4

Families are never alone, pg. 5
Letter from Perkins’ President and CEO

At Perkins School for the Blind, we aim to serve and connect with students and young adults with visual impairment, as well as the families, teachers, administrators and other allies who work with them.

In this issue, we highlight just a few of the many ways we’re reaching out to local, regional and national communities to make this work as impactful as possible.

In our cover story, you’ll read more about Perkins Outreach courses, which bring visually impaired students to campus to meet and get to know one another and to learn skills from cooking to sports to resume writing. You’ll learn more about one student’s transformative experience and how Perkins is bringing these resources to underserved communities.

Also in this issue, you’ll read the moving story of our own Teri Turgeon. First introduced to Perkins while seeking resources for her young daughter, she now serves as director of Community Programs developing a support system that goes far beyond our physical campus. Additionally, you’ll learn about music therapy at Perkins: the social and educational benefits it provides across campus and the way it connects to the larger community.

We are committed to bringing our resources and approaches to those who can benefit from them, wherever they are. With your help, we will continue to expand this work.

Warmly,

W. David Power
President and CEO

Established in 1829 as the nation’s first school for the blind, Perkins today impacts the lives of children and young adults who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired with additional disabilities, as well as educators, professionals and caregivers. Our reach extends across the nation and throughout the world. The school is an accredited member of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. It is licensed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and by the Department of Early Education and Care. Perkins does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, national or ethnic origin, disability, age or sexual orientation.
Inaugural College Success Class goes out on top

After an action-packed nine months, the inaugural College Success@Perkins class graduated in May. In all, eight young adults with visual impairment completed the program, equipping them with the academic and life skills necessary to navigate college life. Some have been accepted into college already, and will pursue degrees this fall. Just as importantly, each student left campus having built new confidence, memories and friendships.

Keeping Kids Out of Orphanages

In many parts of the world, children with visual impairment and additional disabilities are often sent to orphanages that provide minimal education. To help change this practice, Perkins is expanding work in Serbia and Armenia to create alternatives to orphanages and potentially serve as a model for other countries. Through training and knowledge sharing, Perkins is demonstrating that children with multiple disabilities can learn and encouraging community-based educational programs. Already, this work is helping families reunite with their children and access quality education.

Perkins Student Helps Organize the 5K launched in his name

Miles for Kyle is a 5k in Swampscott, MA, with a special Perkins connection. In 2005, Kyle Butt’s parents started the race to raise money for Kyle’s brain surgery. It was so popular that the tradition continues every year to raise money for seizure dogs—Kyle, now a student at Perkins, distributes flyers, encourages participation and rides at the front of the race. “Every year more people come, and we have a bigger presence,” he explains. This year, some of Kyle’s classmates and teachers were among the thousands of attendees.

Spring Jazz Show Mixes Entertainment and Education

Renowned jazz pianist Lisa Hilton returned to Perkins this spring to perform and conduct a master class for students. During the concert, Hilton dazzled with live renditions of original work while the ensuing master class gave Perkins students the opportunity to share their passion for music. Hilton is a longtime friend of Perkins, and a blindness advocate. The Hilton Building that houses Perkins’ Deafblind Program was named for her family, and the Hilton Foundation was instrumental in launching Perkins’ international work some three decades ago.
Throughout the year, students with visual impairment socialize, learn new skills and embrace their passions through condensed, impactful courses.

BY KATHERINE J. IGOE

When students enroll in a Perkins Outreach course, they could be studying music and sound production with the Berklee School of Music. They could be learning to swim, run track and play baseball. Or they could be channeling Bill Nye the Science Guy with science experiments.

Among Perkins Community Programs, these courses are some of the most beloved—and most useful, since they provide the adaptations and skill-building that students may not get at their own schools. Short classes are open to both enrolled Perkins students and those who attend school elsewhere. They range from a weekend to five weeks, customized for children and young adults with visual impairments from age six through 22. Many take place during the summer; some students come from the Northeast, but Perkins sees kids from all around the U.S.

Part of what makes learning at Perkins unique is the focus on incidental learning—skills that sighted people develop through observation, like reading social cues for better social interaction, spatial relations for better navigation and more.

Supervisor Pat Ryan explains, “Someone who’s blind won’t pick up skills through observation like a sighted person. We might have to do a couple things to teach and make something accessible for them. These courses help with those small, nuanced lessons, too.”

Cristin Geraci enrolled her son Tom in a course when he was in second grade. Tom’s now completed at least 10 courses.

During a cooking course last year, he texted her, “I just realized something. When I’m at Perkins Outreach, I don’t feel nearly as insecure about my social skills [as I do] at school. At school, I feel like I need to really try to appear as though I am able to look people in the eye, read facial cues and other stuff that I won’t be able to ever master.

“At Perkins, I’m with people who have those exact social impairments, so I’m actually better socializing with blind people. And I don’t need to really think about my social actions either—it just flows.”

He recently completed the Pre-Employment Program (PEP), which Geraci says was the most useful course to date. “Now he’s 16, and he’s more aware of his vision impairment and how it impacts his future. He’s really a go-getter—he’s aware he needs to build upon some more advanced skills for the future. This course made him feel very proud about where he is in this stage in life. With all the skills he’s gathered, he’s on track.”

Using what he learned, Tom’s requested an informational interview at a local radio station in the hopes of gaining professional experience and, eventually, a career path.

As a next step, the Outreach team is trying to reach more students that they haven’t yet had contact with. Most recently, this has manifested as pop-up events throughout
Massachusetts. Ryan explains, “There are populations we’re not serving—cost or travel may be a barrier—so we try to bring awareness and service to those areas. We want to get out there and build in local communities.” Donor contributions help with this effort as well as funding the programs for existing and future students.

Adds Teri Turgeon, Director of Community Programs, “We hope that as kids try one of them, and we have an opportunity to share information with families, that they then in turn will become part of Outreach here.”

Geraci says the experiences have been invaluable for her son. “Before Perkins, he would ask, ‘When am I going to find kids like me?’” she remembers.

“He now knows other kids who have done the program with him over time. He’s a typical teen, texting them on the phone, meeting with them on weekends. It’s not just limited to the course. These are true friendships, and that’s the most valuable piece.”

If you’re interested in learning more about Perkins short courses, visit Perkins.org/ShortCourses. To read more about incidental learning and our Expanded Core Curriculum, visit Perkins.org/School/ECC

PROFILE
Randy and Tina Kinard

Randy serves on the Board of Trustees, and Tina is a Corporator. They’ve supported Perkins since 2008.

Why do you support the organization?

Tina: I have always been impressed with the historic significance of Perkins. It has this wonderful legacy and presence in Watertown. But today, it’s the global reach and influence that stand out to me: the effect it has on the lives of so many children who are blind or deafblind on campus, across the country and around the world.

What about Perkins’ work is particularly important to you?

Randy: For me, it starts with the kids on campus, from infants to young adults. That’s the foundation of what Perkins does. We continue to be on the cutting edge and are doing the very best for our students. There are also new initiatives like the College Success program, which focuses on increasing the odds of students with visual impairment succeeding not only in college, but also in their careers and independent living. And thinking about broader impact, there are teachers from all over the world who come to Perkins so they can better educate children in their home countries.

What excites you most about the future of Perkins?

Randy: Perkins is coming up on its 190th anniversary, and the current leadership has set appropriately ambitious goals for the future. It’s inspiring to think of what Perkins will be doing over the next 200 years.

Tina: Perkins isn’t resting on its legacy, but is actively looking forward, to find new opportunities to help students and all the people they serve.
The timbre of learning

Music provides countless paths for Perkins students to learn and express themselves.

BY DAVID EISENBERG

For some students, particularly those with limited speaking ability, music therapy offers an outlet for self expression. Working with staff, a student might learn to play loud and fast on a piano to signify excitement. At the same time, music therapy can help students with mobility issues develop physical skills that can be generalized for use in their daily lives. If a student can build the strength and orientation to reach out for a drumstick, or tap keys on a piano, they might then be able to use those skills when reaching out for a spoon, or learning to type on a computer.

“Music therapy helps students relax, express themselves, develop fine motor skills and work on behavioral control,” adds Buchanan. “There’s so much to it.”

Yet it’s not all therapeutic. As in traditional school settings, audition-based groups like the chorus and instrumental ensembles give students the opportunity to learn a variety of instruments and perform for diverse audiences. Of course, parts of the program are uniquely Perkins. Staff create simple tactile adaptations to make instruments more accessible, while regular collaborations with outside organizations and other schools help students build social competencies. This latter element is core to the music program’s mission.

“Music is such a social thing,” says Arnie Harris, music teacher in the Secondary Program. “As much as it’s about the music, it’s also about that outreach in the community.”

These focuses—combining the practical with the fun—make music a vital and multi-faceted part of the Perkins curriculum. It’s a sound that fills the air unseen, but is felt across campus by all.

Chorus students in Dwight Hall rehearse a Bach oratorio for an upcoming concert. A three-year-old in the Lower School taps cacophonously on a piano during a therapy session. All throughout Perkins, the sound of music means students are learning.

“With music, we cover education, entertainment, recreation, social and even clinical work,” says Jill Buchanan, a music therapist in the Lower School. “That’s what’s so cool about the way we teach.”

In other words, at Perkins, every music lesson is tailored for each student’s benefit.

This is most uniquely illustrated by the organization’s use of music’s therapeutic power, as it leverages its offerings to help students sharpen non-musical skills.

Join a community dedicated to educating and empowering people who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired. By giving monthly, you help make it possible for us to serve children and young adults, both locally and globally. Make a difference year-round: start your monthly gift of $10 a month today, and receive a Perkins stainless steel travel mug! Visit Perkins.org/Monthly to learn more.
Families are never alone

Perkins lifts up families of children with visual impairments—but it’s about so much more than being a service provider.

BY TERI TURGEON

My daughter first brought me to Perkins.

It was shortly after learning she’d been born totally blind. We came for a conference, but honestly, I don’t recall much about it. What I do remember is arriving on campus with my daughter in her stroller, her little hands clenched into fists, as they often were, and held over her eyes. I remember, too, seeing for the first time other children holding their hands up, a common habit known as eye-poking, in the same manner. And I remember in that moment feeling my family wasn’t alone.

Fast forward to today: I now serve as the director of Community Programs at Perkins, resolute in working to bring that same feeling to other families.

Our work starts with children from birth to age three and their families, when we provide assessments, early intervention and connections to medical, educational and social resources. As children age, we partner with school districts, deploying teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs) throughout New England to fill whatever roles are necessary. Then there’s Outreach, which brings public school students to our campus for activities that build orientation and mobility, social and independent living skills.

The relationships we build with families don’t end with services rendered, and that’s crucial to reinforcing the sense of togetherness at the heart of Community Programs.

Ancillary to the services we provide, we’re here as a general support system, ready to answer the biggest questions or provide the simplest of directions. It doesn’t matter how much time has passed since a family’s last contact with us, or what service they received. If they need Perkins at any point, we’re here for them. Conversely, if a school district faces a hurdle, or struggles to implement an individual education plan, they can call us. We will answer.

That’s what I ultimately hope families take away from their time with us. Ours is a family-centered practice in every way, and I say that not just as a leader at Perkins, but as a mother too.

Now 23, my daughter has since blossomed into an intelligent, capable young woman and burgeoning political scientist. I’m incredibly proud of her and can’t wait to see what her future holds. As for myself, I now enjoy the privilege of helping families every day unlock the boundless potential within their own children.

As Director of Community Programs, Teri Turgeon oversees the Educational Partnerships and Outreach programs. She has been a member of the Perkins community for nearly 20 years and a leader on staff since 2008.
MAKE A DIFFERENCE YEAR-ROUND

Join a community dedicated to educating and empowering people who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired by giving monthly to Perkins School for the Blind. Learn more at Perkins.org/Monthly.