



# Vision Loss Alliance.....

of New Jersey

Formerly NJ Foundation for the Blind

FALL 2024

## Antonio Horta's New Vision for Life



Antonio Horta

Antonio Horta was among the first wave of Americans critically sickened by the coronavirus in March 2020. Though he survived, the ordeal robbed him of his sight. When he woke following days of treatment, "It's like my lights went out," he said. "At first I thought they had put bandages over my eyes."

Doctors informed Antonio that inflammation in his brain had severely damaged the occipital lobes responsible for visual perception. He remembered the head neurologist delivering the devastating news: "I felt him touch me on the shoulder with what I thought was rolled-up paper and say, 'You'll never see again.'"

### Dark Times

The following weeks and months were dark. Antonio was discharged from rehabilitation two months after being rushed by ambulance to the hospital. Back in his North Bergen home, he showered and climbed into bed, where his beloved Beagle, Layla, licked him again and again, and rested her head on his chest.

At 56, Antonio's 35-year career at Newark Liberty International Airport was over. "I enjoyed working outdoors; I was never a desk person," he said. As a ramp agent, he had guided planes, ensured heat and air conditioning connections, and moved cargo.

Born in Cuba to Spanish parents, Antonio began listening to podcasts from Spain's national organization of the blind to cope with his new circumstances. He joined the northeast chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey and a local support group. Eventually, he learned about Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey (VLANJ) and enrolled in its Independent Living Skills program.

### 'They Are My Angels'

"I season ground beef to make meatballs and prepare sauce with pasta," he said. "I make good scrambled eggs." His newfound confidence in the kitchen inspired Antonio to take other VLANJ classes. Instructors Jackie Millard and Claress Knight taught him how to use all the accessibility features on his iPhone, expanding his world.

"They are my angels," Antonio said of the instructors. "They taught me everything I know and helped me become skilled with the iPhone." Now, Antonio can add contacts, listen to voice messages, and navigate Apple podcasts without help.

At VLANJ, "I met a great group of people who are dedicated to helping us," Antonio said. "They are there for you. They pick up the phone when you call and support you." He is currently enrolled in the Learning Lab, working on a personal computer with Windows, using accessibility software programs like Zoom Text, JAWS, and Fusion.

Married to his wife, Consuelo, for 35 years, the father of two grown children has built a strong social network. "Most of my friends now are part of the blind community," he said.

Donations to Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey can be made online at [vlanj.org/donations](http://vlanj.org/donations) or by mailing a check to Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey, 155 Morris Ave., Suite 2, Denville, NJ, 07834, ATTN: VP of Development and Communications Jennifer Singer





**BILL SCHULDT**  
President and CEO

**Dear Friend,**

After several years focused on developing innovative and flexible programming, Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey decided to prioritize raising our visibility in 2024. And the effort is paying off: we're on track to connect with over 1,000 people—nearly four times more than last year. Program enrollment is up, and we're forging stronger ties with corporations, local businesses, and community organizations.

I and other members of our leadership team are frequently

out and about talking with leaders of businesses, academic institutions, and service organizations about VLANJ's impact in empowering adults with vision loss or blindness. In February, we hired blindness advocate **Trisha Ebel** as outreach coordinator for our growing **VLANJ@Home program**. Trisha is doing an excellent job spreading the word not only about this successful in-home occupational therapy program, but all our in-person and virtual programs.

The goal is for people beyond our tight-knit community to understand how vital VLANJ is. Our participants learn valuable skills in daily living and assistive technology, and their physical and mental health are nurtured. You'll enjoy reading about **Antonio Horta**, who overcame despair to embrace the life he has built.

Focused on awareness-raising, we postponed our major annual fundraiser normally held during **Blindness Awareness**

**Month** in October until April 24, 2025. We think you'll agree our **Visions of Spring** event will be worth the wait! We'll celebrate our third annual **Day of Giving** on Oct. 10 into Oct. 11, with donations supporting our mental health initiative. We've also added a special **Mental Health and Wellness Day** on Oct. 23 and hope you'll join us. Read on to learn the details.

As always, thank you for your support, and please keep sharing what makes VLANJ amazing. Reach out to people who could benefit from our services and those who might be inspired to make us one of their charities of choice. Wishing you all the best. As always, feel free to reach out to me with your ideas.

Sincerely,  
Bill Schuldt

VLANJ President and CEO  
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(973) 627-0055

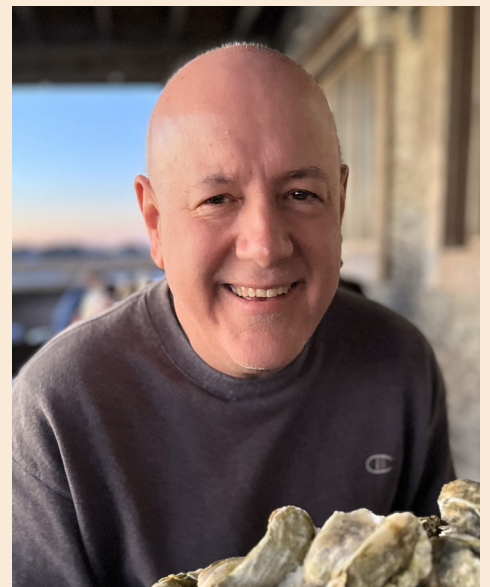
## Meet FRANK CAFASSO: VLANJ's Newest Trustee

Frank Cafasso joined the VLANJ Board of Trustees at the invitation of board President Carl Augusto, his accounting client of 30 years. Cafasso knew from Augusto about the life-changing work VLANJ does, and attended its major fundraiser for three years. Getting to see firsthand what goes on at VLANJ really impressed him.

"It's amazing the work they do," said Cafasso, who owns a successful tax and accounting firm in Ridgewood. "It's good to see them blossoming."

Cafasso earned a bachelor of arts in economic finance and accounting from Fordham University and has owned his company since 2008. He is using his expertise to ensure VLANJ remains strong financially.

Cafasso and his wife, Lori Ann, live in Paramus and have three grown children. Cafasso served eight years as treasurer of the Paramus Lacrosse Association, a league on which a son played.



**Frank Cafasso**

# Finding Independence with VLANJ@Home



**Janet Roesch, VLANJ client with Jean Lin, OTR/L**

Janet Roesch, one of the first participants in VLANJ@Home, credits the low vision occupational therapy program with transforming her life. Learning to navigate her Paramus home safely and maximizing her independence, she frequently told occupational therapist Jean Lin that the program “saved my life.” As an avid reader, Roesch was thrilled when VLANJ@Home connected her with The Talking Book & Braille Center and showed her how to access audiobooks. Launched nearly a year ago, VLANJ@Home is a first-of-its-kind program in New Jersey, providing specialized services to individuals with vision loss. As of Aug. 1, the program had served 32 people, including 25

in 2024, with expectations to reach 40 by year’s end.

“We identify their needs and frustrations, then develop individualized plans to build confidence in safely accomplishing daily living activities,” explained VLANJ Vice President of Programs Elsa Zavoda, an OT certified in low vision by the American Occupational Therapy Association.

## Three Accredited OTs

Under Zavoda’s supervision, three accredited occupational therapists teach clients strategies for adjusting lighting, enhancing contrast, improving household organization, and reducing fall risks. Clients range from those new to vision loss to those experiencing progressive vision loss, or individuals who have lost a key family member who previously assisted them.

Each client begins the program with a 90-minute intake (Initial Evaluation) to assess home setup, family support, and needs. “We discuss their goals and frustrations,” Zavoda said. This is followed by four to seven 60-minute weekly sessions tailored to the client’s needs. Individuals interested in VLANJ@Home need a referral from an eye care specialist to qualify; most major insurances, including Medicare, covering the costs.

## Generous Funders

Thanks to generous funders, people lacking insurance coverage have been able to enroll in VLANJ@Home, and some clients have received vision-enhancing equipment such as lamps and magnifiers. The program has been supported by: the Lavelle Fund for the Blind; The Hyde and Watson Foundation; Atlantic Health System; the William G. & Helen C. Hoffman Foundation; the McGuinn Family Foundation; Fund for the New Jersey Blind; and the Lydia Collins deForest Charitable Trust.

Jeff Wayne, another client, used VLANJ@Home to prepare for his return to work. The program identified accommodations for essential job duties and introduced him to assistive devices like anti-glare filters, a handheld magnifier, and portable electronic magnification. He was also connected with resources like the Eye2Eye Peer Support Group and the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. “VLANJ@Home has opened up doors for clients. Many want to know how they can stay involved and have joined other VLANJ offerings,” Zavoda said. For more information about participating or sponsoring the program, contact Elsa Zavoda at (973) 627-0055 ext. 3, or email [ezavoda@vlanj.org](mailto:ezavoda@vlanj.org).

## Planned Giving

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey has served members of the blind and low vision community for more than 80 years. Planned gifts have long been an important source of funding to support our mission. By including VLANJ in your estate plan, you create a lasting legacy that may also generate tax benefits for you and your family. Whether through a bequest, charitable trust, insurance plan, annuity or another financial instrument, The Diamond Spring Society celebrates your support with special recognition. Consider leaving a legacy, so your cherished values live on. For more information or for help making a planned gift, please contact Jennifer Singer at [jsinger@vlanj.org](mailto:jsinger@vlanj.org) or 973-627-0055, ext. 1323.





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# Save The Dates!

We've changed the dates and themes of our two fundraisers and added a special event during **Blindness Awareness Month** in October. Our third annual **Day of Giving** starts on **Oct. 10, World Sight Day**, and will run for **1 day, 9 hours and 43 minutes** to commemorate our founding year, 1943. Our goal is to raise **\$10,000** to support our **Mental Health Initiative**.

Adults with vision loss in the U.S. are two to three times more likely to experience depression, and have a higher prevalence of anxiety and other mental health issues. Proceeds from the **Day of Giving Challenge** will promote mental health through programs in self-advocacy, peer

support, yoga, meditation and creative arts.

We're also hosting a **Mental Health & Wellness Day** on Oct. 23, with in-person classes in yoga, sound healing, nutrition and decluttering, along with lunch and a conversation on managing mental health. Contact VLANJ Program Director Vicki Lowrie at (973) 627-0055, ext. 4 or [vlowrie@vlanj.org](mailto:vlowrie@vlanj.org) to register for this free event.

We'll host **Visions of Spring**, an evening of music and inspiration, on **April 24, 2025** at **The Mansion at Mountain Lakes**. You'll enjoy delicious food and drink, a silent auction, and a special performance by

musicians from the **Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenburg Music School** in New York City. The school promotes lifelong music learning for people of all ages with vision loss or blindness. **Mark your calendars!**

