

S.E.E. Makes a Difference

When schools closed their doors due to the coronavirus this spring, educators and parents scrambled for ways to keep students' learning on track. IFB Solutions' commitment to students with vision impairments was also put to the test but passed with flying colors.

The Student Enrichment Experience (S.E.E.) After School Program in Charlotte, NC is headed by Program Coordinator Alli Romero. She is a certified teacher of the visually impaired. "The pandemic is changing the world for educators everywhere," she said. She and her professional team used their expertise to offer online classes.

Five days a week, S.E.E. students met via Zoom, a communication platform. Alli described a typical week: "Mondays, we'd do a recipe or craft project. Tuesday, an exercise routine. Wednesday, we'd listen to



S.E.E. Charlotte students and Program Manager Alli Romero tubing on Lake Norman. S.E.E. gives kids with vision challenges the same experience as their sighted peers.

an audio book. Thursday would be yoga or a guided meditation." She goes on to share: "With limited opportunities for social interaction with stay at home orders in place, we also allowed the students to stay on the supervised Zoom call to connect with their friends."

On Fridays, an orientation and mobility instructor helped students explore making a mental map to a familiar destination. For example, students would imagine the route they would take to get from their classroom to the playground. They would describe their path using cardinal directions for turns (NSEW) and auditory landmarks (such as the sound of a water fountain.)

A lesson on troubleshooting asked the question: "How would you know where to get off your bus if the bus speaker system failed?" Students practiced remembering the order of streets on their bus route by memorizing the first letter of each street name in sequence.

At the end of the school year, Alli's team shifted gears to prepare for summer camp. IFB Solutions partners with the Lake Norman YMCA's summer camp program. The partnership makes it possible for visually impaired students to experience the joys of camp along with their sighted peers. "Our teachers bring adaptive sports



With many activities canceled, IFB Solutions is grateful to provide safe outdoor experiences for children with vision loss thanks to community donations and support.

equipment. These include beeping and high-contrast balls, and accessible games. We support our students' needs."

As the school district formulates plans for the fall, the S.E.E. Program will follow their lead. "Right now, we're developing two plans – teaching in person and online," Alli said. "When we are able to meet in person, we'll have three rooms with no more than four students and two teachers at a station. We will follow masking, hand washing, and room sanitizing guidelines. And we are planning more outdoor activities, weather permitting."

The pandemic has changed our world. S.E.E. Charlotte is here to ensure these children are supported academically and socially despite the obstacles coronavirus has presented. With community support, we can overcome this challenge together.

Making Work... Work

Vasudha Rangapathy, Vice President of Information Technology and E-commerce



Changing jobs so they are accessible to people with impaired vision requires innovation, flexibility, and creative problem solving. IFB Solutions is committed to doing just that. It is the most rewarding aspect of Vasudha Rangapathy's job. As Vice President of Information Technology and E-commerce, she sees that commitment matched in the daily dedication of her employees.

"I'm extremely proud of our customer service representatives who are visually impaired," Vasudha said. "Answering customers' calls can be a tough job, and there are additional challenges for those with low vision – they have to be on top of their game." Wearing headphones, representatives listen to customers in one ear and the voice of a computer screen reading software in the other ear, while navigating the e-commerce website at the same time. "They are motivated to ensure that customers' needs are met. And they appreciate having

a job. The unemployment rate for people with vision impairments is staggering! (Over 70% of Americans who are blind do not have a job.) Nothing gives me more pride than being able to make a job accessible, especially a job that allows for upward mobility."

The COVID pandemic presented Vasudha and her team with a daunting new challenge: helping employees work remotely from home. "It caused us to rethink how we could continue to do business. It all happened so quickly," she said. "In a matter of days, we switched as many administrative jobs as we could to remote tele-work. That meant we had to tighten the security of our systems. In some cases, we had to provide home printers, monitors, and other hardware as well as training and software."

Pivoting quickly was risky. Would employees be able to adjust? "Initially, it took some getting used to," Vasudha admitted, "but once people got their home offices set up, I started hearing positive comments." As schools and daycares shut down, parents were scrambling. "They appreciated being home with their children," she said. No one misses the commute to work. Online Zoom meetings start and end on time. Employees soon began reporting that they had more time

to focus with fewer interruptions. Instead of meeting clients face-to-face, the sales team was able to continue selling online and by phone without skipping a beat.

Vasudha and other members of the executive team rotate working on site. "As a critical supplier to the Department of Defense, we need to be on site to support our hundreds of employees who manufacture supplies for the national security mission and the nation's COVID-19 response," she said.

"We are also grateful to add new products such as personal protective equipment including face masks," Vasudha said. "It feels good to know we are making a difference with what we do every day."

RUN THE TRADITION!

Santa's Showdown 5K is once again pitting Elves against Reindeer in a fight for North Pole bragging rights. This dog friendly and stroller friendly family tradition is the perfect start to your holiday.

Saturday, Dec. 5, Recreation Park in East Asheville, NC

Virtual option available!

**www.IFBShowdownRace.com
Registration goes LIVE in September.**



What Is It That You Are Able To Give? Your Time? Money? Ideas?

Kathryn Garner's greatest wish is that there is no blindness in this world and that any visual impairment can be fixed. "I hope there is a medical answer to every vision problem that can be conceived. Then our organization would take our strengths and find other ways to serve our community. Wouldn't that be wonderful?" asks Kathryn.

Kathryn has been an avid supporter of IFB Solutions since the mid-'80s. One day, she finally agreed to follow the recommendation of her uncle to take a tour of the organization. She remembered her dad, Thad Garner, the founder of TW Garner Food Company, was a long-standing supporter of the Lions Club. So, she toured IFB and was "instantly in." Ever since, she has been encouraging people in our community to tour the organization because she knew they would walk away utterly inspired.

"I try to support worthwhile organizations. As soon as I met the team at IFB, the organization moved to the top of my donation list," she remembers. "This is the place where you immediately see the results of giving, whether you give time, effort or money."

Kathryn continues to be inspired by the many volunteers on IFB Solutions' Board of Directors who have remained focused on the organization's mission and doing whatever it takes to create new and innovative employment opportunities for people who are blind or visually

impaired. She has also seen the dedication of the management team who take their work at IFB as a life mission and not just a job. But what is most rewarding to Kathryn is meeting so many employees who gained independence because of their involvement in IFB's programs. She witnessed the unprecedented growth of the organization over the last 15 years to become the largest employer of people who are blind in the country.

"Once you understand the organization, you just want to be a part of it. It doesn't matter how you give to IFB. What can you give? Please consider giving your time, money, and ideas!" Kathryn goes on to say that whatever gift you can make, you will be rewarded tenfold through the gift of hope, happiness, and independence you see in those that are served.



Kathryn Garner poses in front of the artwork honoring her volunteer efforts at IFB Solutions' Tracy's Little Red Schoolhouse in Winston-Salem.

Once asked about the brightest stories of people who are blind she met over the years, Kathryn is perplexed: "How can one choose? There are so many, and each person working at IFB Solutions or receiving services is the reason the community has to come together to support this wonderful nonprofit."

Thank You to all those who responded to our call for support of the People First Fund! With the help of over 100 community donors, we have raised over \$88,000 and helped more than 560 IFB employees during the pandemic.



For most recent information about our fundraising events in 2020, visit our website: ifbsolutions.org/events

Staying Safe in a Time of Uncertainty

When the U.S. Department of Defense deemed IFB Solutions an essential manufacturer for the Armed Forces, it was welcomed news. For seamstress Regina Dumas, it meant she could continue working and supporting her family.

Regina has been an IFB employee for most of her adult life. Although retinitis pigmentosa has narrowed her vision to seeing through a tunnel, she is good at what she does. “When I first came here, I had a lot of ambition. I wanted a good job,” she said. “My cerebral palsy affects my balance, and I have more strength in my toes than I do in my heel.” IFB modified a sewing machine pedal for her. “Once I started sewing, there was no stopping me! I’ve been sewing ever since!” She and her co-workers sew clothing for the military.

Working in a time of COVID-19 means following strict health guidelines: wearing masks, washing hands, and practicing social distancing. But that hasn’t slowed Regina down a bit. “I get joy out of going to work every morning,” she said.

Having steady work over the years has enabled Regina to raise four children and pay off her mortgage. She doesn’t take it for granted. It’s a lesson she shares with others. “I’m what you call a motivator,” she said.



Nothing stands in Regina’s way as she proudly sews T-shirts for the U.S. military at the IFB Solutions Little Rock facility.

“I encourage other employees with vision impairments, especially the young ones, to appreciate what they have. I tell them to be thankful for this opportunity, and not to let all the uncertainty in the world get to them. I tell them I want them to do good, and they listen. They really make me proud!” For Regina and her co-workers, having steady work feels good. And it also feels good to have work that is keeping people safe from COVID-19.

During the pandemic, IFB Solutions started making masks for the U.S. Airforce, the community, and our own employees. The masks can be purchased through our e-commerce store [bscsource.com](https://www.bscsource.com). IFB also donated masks made by people who

are blind to VA hospitals in Winston-Salem, Asheville, and Little Rock.



Randy Buckner, IFB Asheville Director of Operations, and Fred Groce, Asheville Advisory Board Chair, presenting masks to Craig Doane, the Charles George VA Medical Center Chief of Voluntary Service.



Between July 15 and August 15, Steps to S.E.E. peer-to-peer virtual event raised over \$15,000 in community support tripling the goal!

S.E.E. After School Program needs support all year long.

WILL YOU HELP?