

Audio file

[Independent Perspective #1825 \(Douglas Usiak\).mp3](#)

Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Welcome to Independent Perspective, a public affairs presentation of Western New York Independent Living (WNYIL). Our guest today is Douglas Usiak, chief executive officer of the WNYIL family of agencies. And I'm your host, Ernie Churchwell. Welcome to the program, Doug.

00:00:17 Speaker 2

Thanks, Ernie, and glad to be here.

00:00:19 Speaker 1

And you're here because we were inspired to invite you after an op-ed column that you wrote for the two Niagara County newspapers in which you explained the importance of making your independent ballet come election time. First, could you explain to people why that was a challenge for you?

00:00:44 Speaker 2

Yeah, 1974, I was in the army in station Okinawa as an electronic technician. And I happened to have an unfortunate accident where a pressure gauge to a hydraulic line blew up in my face, leaving me blind for the rest of my life instantly.

00:01:00 Speaker 1

Oh, that's rough, but I believe you have said that if you're going to lose your sight, any place the US military is the place you should be.

00:01:11 Speaker 2

Yes. So that's because after World War II, there was a big push by veterans, service-connected veterans who lost their site to create blind rehabilitation.

00:01:22 Speaker 2

To help the veterans return back into society as contributing members, and that it was discharged immediately out of Walter Reed into a rehab center that prepared me to take

on the challenge of the world by learning Braille, mobility and other things that I needed to do in order to live independently back home.

00:01:45 Speaker 1

I'm sure many people will be surprised that although you learn to do many things by means other than sight, something that particularly irked you was your inability to cast a private, independent ballot at election time.

00:02:01 Speaker 2

Yeah, but back then, if you didn't have site, you went into the polling place with one Democrat, one Republican, you know, somebody worked at the poll. So, you had two strangers looking at who you were selecting. So, there was no privacy there and certainly not independent. Later, as I've got more and more involved, I was able to possibly bring a friend, at times they were challenged. When I got married, I brought my wife and even as my children got older, I even took them into the place. The only trouble is that it was never a private ballot, people sometimes would give a sigh or make a little comment about, you know, my selections. So, you know I never had that total privacy and that freedom of independence.

00:02:49 Speaker 1

What caused that to change?

00:02:52 Speaker 2

Well, what happened was in early 2000, the Help America Vote Act came out. Money was given to the states to make elections much more accessible for all people, not just people with disabilities. And what came out were ballot machines that could read the ballot to you, and you can make your selections. So back then the first time it came out, you had to travel several miles to go to vote in the primary. I did that.

00:03:23 Speaker 2

And in the machine I put on the headset and it read to me my selection, I picked my selection. Then it confirmed my selection and then at the end of all my selections it would read everything back to me so I could add confirmation it would print it out. It would ask if I want the ballot spit out to me to go put it in the main ballot box. Or would they prefer that the machine take the ballot and be counted with the absentee ballots? So, I even had my choice at how I wanted to handle the ballot and that made a huge difference.

00:03:58 Speaker 2

I'll share with you Ernie, that it was actually very thrilling at the time when that happened, because after 30 years of voting with somebody else, I actually sat down, made my selection of who I wanted to run my country, my state, my government, level of government and it was just a very great tingling feeling that I had throughout my body.

00:04:19 Speaker 2

The for the first time, without any assistance at all.

00:04:24 Speaker 1

Doug, we're just about out of time. I'm sure people will have questions. How can they reach you?

They can call me at the Independent Living Center at 716-836-0822, ext. 117 and I'll be happy to take your call.

00:04:38 Speaker 1

Thanks so much for being with us, Doug.

00:04:40 Speaker 2

Thank you, Ernie.

00:04:42 Speaker 1

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