

Foundations We Did Not Lay

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We build on foundations we did not lay
We warm ourselves by fires we did not light
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant
We drink from wells we did not dig
We profit from persons we did not know...
Together we are more than any one person could be.
Together we can build across generations.

–The Rev. Dr. Peter S. Raible

In July 2024, in Charlotte, NC, 600-plus of us celebrated AER's 40th anniversary. Through shared stories and replayed memories, we acknowledged and honored the significant insight, courage, and plain old audacity it took to consolidate two century-old, emotionally invested professional organizations into one new, dynamic, united association.

At our Anniversary Gala event, Kathleen Megivern, AER's first Executive Director, shared glimpses of the forces that moved our two predecessor associations to consolidate as the AAWB-AEVH Alliance that became AER. She helped us understand the courage, diligence, and humor of those leaders who, building on the traditions of our predecessor associations, laid the foundation for the new association. Others who served on the Alliance Board of Directors and on AER's earliest International Boards shared the accomplishments of the young AER powered by the optimistic energy of diverse professionals united in their commitment to our profession and to the services we provide. Together, we honored our past and, we hope, inspired our future.

Throughout this 40th anniversary year, we strive to recognize the strength of the diversity we share under the name and structure of Association for Education and

The New RE:view

Winter/Spring, 2025, Vol. 3(1) 1-3

DOI: 10.56733/TNR.25.002

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Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired. We also acknowledge that our association's roots and mission, our common spirit and our intent are really much older than four decades. These 40 years under the name "AER" are only the most recent incarnation of our association's ambitions.

Our legacy of advocacy and excellence and the mantle of responsibility we now wear date back to 1853. On August 16 of that year, representatives, including teachers, from 14 institutions, the oldest of which had been founded only 20 years earlier, met for the first time. Together, they envisioned a network through which they could share their practices and resources and could work to advance education and opportunities for blind children and young people. The group formed the American Association of Instructors of the Blind (AAIB) whose activism and dogged resolve led to the establishment of formal educational systems where none existed. Their tenacious advocacy spread and modernized educational opportunities, and they successfully campaigned for a national system to develop and disseminate educational materials designed for blind students.

It was this group of reformers, first convening in 1853, that brought about the 1879 federal "Act to Promote the Education of the Blind," still in effect today. As stated in an article titled *History of the American Association of Instructors of the Blind*, "This grand result alone justifies the existence of the association. . . . It was the first recognition by the general government that the blind had any rights which it was bound to respect" (*The Mentor*, 1892).

That 1853 meeting that dug our initial foundation has been heralded as "the first meeting of its kind ever held on the American continent" (*The Mentor*, 1892). The same article goes on to say: "Until this act was passed, the children who live in continuous night had been neglected and ignored. It was a triumph of human rights, and it germinated in the first meeting of the association."

Later in the 1880s, other activists established a separate association to address the lack of higher education and employment opportunities for blind adults. In 1905, that association, spearheaded by Ambrose Shotwell, became the American Association of Workers for the Blind (AAWB), our other predecessor organization. AAWB's long history of germinating and advancing rehabilitation services and employment opportunities for adults who are blind is legendary. Those accomplishments last today.

AER's first President, Dr. Richard Welsh, summed it up when he wrote: "In developing AER and continuing the evolution of this professional association, we were—and are—standing on the shoulders of giants who had come together to have a very positive impact on the lives and opportunities of blind people and those who served them. We can and should be proud" (Welsh, 2014).

Those of us “in the trenches” today are generations away from the 1853 beginnings that eventually led to AER, yet our goals and inspirations remain very much the same. Our work is founded on the accomplishments and advancements of a long caravan of people much like ourselves, professionals who had the grace and the gumption to forge a better future.

Yes, our professional roots run deep. Our foundation, laid by 171 years of noble work and courageous risk taking, is solid. It serves us well today as we continue to strengthen the quality of services we provide, to heighten the effectiveness of our practice, and to hold tight to our founders’ unswerving commitment to excellence and opportunity.

It is our turn to reinforce and improve AER’s foundations. The responsibility is now ours to enrich the legacy we create daily for the professionals who come next and the people they will serve. We members of AER truly are building on “foundations we did not lay.” We are profiting from contributions of “persons we did not know.” And “together we can build across generations” as we cement AER’s foundations for the future.

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Published online 24 February 2025