

Summer 2026

DONKA DIGEST

Board Member Spotlight

Proving Different Doesn't Mean Less Welcoming Linda Bannon to Donka's Board

When Donka welcomed Linda Bannon, we gained more than a Board Member, we gained an advocate and educator whose life has been defined by resilience, innovation, and an unwavering belief in human potential.

Born with Holt-Oram syndrome and without arms, Linda grew up learning how to navigate the world differently, but from the very beginning, her parents encouraged her to approach life with determination and creativity rather than limitation.

"I want to see how far I can push the envelope, simply to say I did it. I want to prove I might be different, but I'm not less," Linda said with determination.

As the oldest of five children, Linda was raised in Bellwood and later Hillside, Illinois, in a large, supportive family that helped shape her independence and confidence. Her childhood was marked by inclusion at a time when accessibility and accommodations were far less common than they are today.

"In the early '80s, it was more of a sink-or-swim mentality, so I became a good problem solver and found creative ways to make things work for me," she said.

Recognizing Linda's sharp intellect, her teachers refused to let her disability lower the bar for success. That belief in her ability became a defining force in her life.

"My educational experiences, my teachers, and how they assessed each situation to adapt to my needs without lowering expectations truly shaped who I am today," Linda shared.

(cnt'd.)



Her experiences, both positive and negative, ultimately inspired Linda to become the kind of educator she wished every child could have.

After earning a full-ride scholarship to Triton College and later transferring to Elmhurst University, Linda went on to spend 12 years as a kindergarten teacher. While one school environment felt supportive and family-oriented, another became toxic enough that she made the difficult decision to step away for the sake of her mental health.



Donka's Executive Director, Leanne Vos, with Linda Bannon and her son Tim Bannon



Donka Instructors, Kimberly Delaney, Ann Byrne & John Strong with Linda Bannon

Since then, Linda has found new purpose through freelance public speaking and advocacy work within the disability community. What began as a single classroom presentation at Elmhurst University — invited by a former professor and Donka Board Member, Jim Benzin — evolved into a recurring opportunity to educate future generations about disability, inclusion, and lived experience.

(cnt'd.)

Outside of advocacy and volunteer work, Linda enjoys painting, crocheting & baking —passions rooted in family traditions. Her family didn't just prepare her for the world, they provided her with the foundation for her own journey into motherhood.

"My greatest accomplishment was raising a good human being and sending him out into the world to do great things," she said of her son, who was also born without arms. Watching him navigate life independently and confidently has reinforced something she deeply believes in: ***people with disabilities deserve the opportunity to discover their own ways of succeeding.***

"I realized early on that my son was just like me. Rather than letting me guide him through my lived experience, he wanted to figure things out on his own."

That philosophy is why Linda felt drawn to Donka's mission.

"I want people to understand that someone's approach may be different, and it may take them longer to figure things out, but people can do anything if they're empowered and supported."

Linda values the way Donka provides training and support services to people with disabilities to create a pathway to employment, recognizing that employment is the key to being an independent adult. As a board member, she hopes to connect more people with the resources they need and remind them not to let doubt define what's possible.

"Don't take no for an answer," she said. "If people are telling you, it's not possible, find a way to show them it is."

Linda also hopes to utilize her position to encourage employers to rethink assumptions about disability in the workplace.

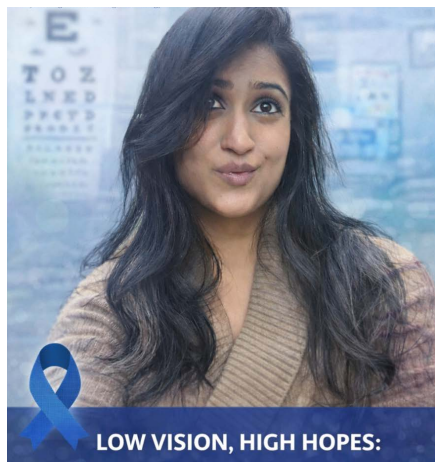
"My mission is to make employers realize that people with disabilities are invaluable problem solvers, born to be leaders," Linda said, determined to change that perception.

Success Stories

Low Vision, High Hopes *From Vision Loss to Donka*

Low Vision Awareness is deeply personal to me—not just as a professional working in the disability space, but as someone who has navigated a lifelong journey with vision loss.

My name is Anam Minhas, and I joined Donka in January 2025 as the Marketing, Communications & Development Specialist. ***My journey to Donka was a full-circle moment and a true reflection of the life-changing impact organizations like Donka have on people with disabilities.***



I have been visually impaired since birth, but I was not diagnosed with Stargardt disease until the age of eight. Stargardt is a progressive rare eye disease that causes central vision loss due to fatty buildup in the retina, and reaching that diagnosis was a long and uncertain journey filled with countless doctor visits, specialists, and unanswered questions. For years, my family and I searched for clarity about my vision and what it meant for my future.

For most of my life, I carried my vision loss quietly and invisibly. I resisted accessibility tools and struggled to use them to their full potential out of fear of being different from my peers. Because of that, I never spoke openly about my vision impairment—not even when I should have. But life has a way of reshaping perspective.

After leaving my previous role, I found myself navigating a difficult and discouraging job search. Despite holding a B.S. in Marketing, my career path led me to the financial sector, where I spent seven years as a Mortgage Loan Officer with PNC Bank. In my tenure, I became a top-producing loan officer and earned several awards and recognitions for my work, but I still felt a strong pull to return to my roots in marketing and communications—work that aligned closely with my passion for storytelling, connection, and community impact.

(cont'd.)

I attended countless career fairs, including several focused on disability employment, and submitted numerous applications without success. Like many individuals with disabilities, I faced invisible barriers that went beyond qualifications or experience.

It was through one of these resource fairs, I learned about Illinois' job placement services for people with disabilities. I opened a case with the Bureau of Blind Services, and they put in a referral to Donka for job placement, but in a powerful twist of fate, Donka had an internal job opening that aligned perfectly with my career goals, my skills, and most importantly, my passion.

Over the course of my career, I have worked with three nonprofits devoted to supporting people with disabilities. Along the way, I met students living with vision impairments and their parents. Many of these parents carried the same fears mine once did—wondering if their child would finish school, find a career, or live independently as their vision changed. When they saw me in a professional role, confident, working, and thriving, I could see a shift in them. ***Hope replaced fear. Possibility replaced uncertainty.***

These connections fill me with purpose. They remind me how far I have come—from a scared child navigating a world with few resources, to an adult helping ensure others have access to the tools and opportunities I once struggled to find. And it is exactly why my journey connects so deeply with Donka's mission.

Today, at Donka, I have the privilege of helping others access the same life-changing resources that once transformed my own path. ***Every story we share, every program we promote, and every person we serve represents possibility.*** It represents someone gaining confidence, someone entering the workforce, someone reclaiming independence, and someone realizing they are not alone.

This is the first time I am fully sharing my story—not because it is easy, but because it matters. Because somewhere, a parent is afraid for their child's future. Somewhere, a child feels different and alone. Somewhere, an individual is getting a diagnosis and wondering if life will still be full of possibility.

To them, I want to say this:

I was that child. My parents carried those fears. And today, I stand here—living proof—that a diagnosis does not define your future.

Vision is not only what we see. It is what we dare to believe is possible. And when that belief meets support, community, and opportunity — lives change.

Donka Student Shines as a ComEd Energy Force Ambassador

A Unique Initiative That Empowers Individuals with Disabilities

At Donka, we understand that employment is more than just a job—it's a pathway to independence. We are always looking for opportunities that empower our students and create meaningful community impact. That is why we are thrilled to partner with ComEd for a second year in a row on their Energy Force Ambassador program.

ComEd exemplifies the power of inclusion, accessibility, and community through this initiative. The Energy Force Ambassador Program creates meaningful opportunities for people with disabilities to educate communities about energy efficiency strategies while building confidence, leadership skills, and workplace experience.



These ambassadors play a crucial role in spreading awareness about ComEd's mission, engaging directly with the public at events throughout the year. Programs like this prove that inclusion strengthens communities and empowers individuals to make a real impact.

Our Job Placement Specialist, Carlos Johnson, is committed to workforce development by forging partnerships with area employers and championing inclusive hiring.

We are grateful to be part of initiatives like this that open doors, amplify voices, and celebrate abilities.

We are incredibly proud of our students and graduates and cannot wait to see the impact they make as they pursue higher education, career opportunities and most importantly, their full potential.

To read more success stories and student spotlights, visit us Online at donkainc.org and learn how your support fuels Donka's mission.

Upcoming Events

Join Donka, Inc. at
ROCKIN' FOR OUR VETS
 Concert for Charity
 ft. **GARY SINISE**
& THE LT. DAN BAND
 July 11 | Cantigny Park



Tickets are \$50 and space is limited, so scan the QR code below or visit wsfdv.org to reserve your spot today. Can't attend? Purchase a "Treat a Vet" ticket to send a Veteran in your place!



Honor the Legacy.
 Celebrate the Service.
 Support the cause.



Donka is honored to be selected as one of 25 charitable partners for this year's America 250 celebration, hosted by West Suburban Foundation for Disabled Veterans (WSFDV) in partnership with the Gary Sinise Foundation.

Join us for an unforgettable day of music & meaning as we honor our nation's heroes while raising funds for charitable organizations dedicated to supporting and uplifting local veterans. Proceeds from this event help programs like Donka's **Operation Brighter Future**, which empower veterans in the local community through computer training, job readiness skills, and meaningful job placement.



DONKA'S TRIVIA NIGHT

Join us on Saturday, October 3, 2026 for
"Now That's What I Call Access"
 Donka's 3rd Annual Trivia Night Fundraiser

A **FUN, FUN, FUNdraiser** full of:

- 90's Themed Trivia
- Costume Contest
- 90's Music All Night
- Silent Auction Baskets
- Raffles & Prizes
- Complimentary Refreshments
- Cash Bar

We are Excited to Welcome Baig of Tricks Entertainment as this year's Trivia Host!

Grab Your Trivia Squad and Take Advantage of Discounted **Early-Bird Pricing** Now through Labor Day:

- \$35 for an Individual ticket
- \$260 for a table of Eight

Space is Limited so get your tickets to reserve your spot today!

Can't Attend? You Can Still Make a Meaningful Impact! Learn How You Can Become a Donor or Sponsor and Help Make This Event a Success!

Scan the QR code below or visit donkainc.org to Learn More!



Your support fuels our mission:
"Empowering Abilities Through Technology"

It is only through vigorous fundraising and supporters like you, Donka can continue offering services at **no-cost** to our students, over 80% of whom are low-income.

We Thank You for your Support!



Saturday | October 3rd
 American Legion Post 76 | Carol Stream
 Doors Open at 6 PM | Trivia Starts at 7 PM

THANK YOU SPONSORS



Donka is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization established in January 1987. For nearly four decades, Donka has been committed to the educational and professional development of **individuals with disabilities, veterans and seniors** by bridging the gap of access and opportunity through training, resources and support.

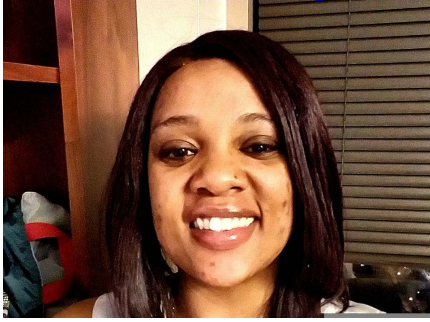
Donka is the only organization in its service area to offer **no-cost training** via a **low student-teacher ratio** (1:1 or 2:1) using a curriculum that is customized for each student.

Donka's curriculum is approved by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (**IBHE**), which allows us to offer graduates a **"Certificate of Completion"** that is recognized by other IBHE approved institutions.

We are also approved as a computer skills training provider by the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), Illinois Bureau of Blind Services (BBS), Illinois Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) program, and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA).

Student Testimonial

Suzanne Swanigan



Suzanne Swanigan came to Donka after she was forced to step away from her career due to vision loss caused by diabetic retinopathy. What started as gradual vision impairment progressed to total blindness in one eye and significantly limited vision in the other.

Determined to regain her independence and return to the workforce, Suzanne sought out resources through the state and was connected to Donka for computer and Assistive Technology training.

Through her training at Donka, Suzanne

(cnt'd)

is working toward becoming fully proficient navigating computers independently using the JAWS screen reader program.

"I attribute my development and growth to my instructor, Kimberly Delaney, for making the training experience especially impactful. Kimberly's ability to assess my existing knowledge and tailor lessons accordingly created a highly personalized learning environment. Whether aligning the curriculum to fit my schedule or quickly shifting gears to teach me how to navigate Zoom with JAWS for a deposition, Kimberly's adaptability and dedication are second to none.

I am especially grateful for the encouragement and mentorship I received at Donka—not only in mastering assistive technology, but also in learning how to confidently navigate life as a person with vision loss."

Suzanne is grateful for donor support that helps individuals like herself regain confidence and independence. With the skills and support she's gaining at Donka, she is certain that she is more than capable of returning to the workforce.



Empowering Abilities Through Technology

Donka, Inc.

400 N. County Farm Road

Wheaton, IL 60187

630-665-8169

www.donkainc.org



For More Information:

Tours and Donations:

Leanne Vos

Executive Director

630-665-8169, Ext. 10

lvos@donkainc.org

Training and Workshops:

Samantha Moore

Program Manager

630-665-8169, Ext. 11

smoore@donkainc.org

Nonprofit
U.S. Postage
PAID
Bolingbrook, IL
Permit No. 787

Donka, Inc.
400 North County Farm Road
Wheaton, IL 60187
Empowering Abilities Through Technology

