

A Visionary's Journey

Virginia Jacko's career didn't end when she lost her sight. Instead, it took a whole new direction, bringing her to a new role as a nonprofit CEO. Here, she shares four key lessons she learned along the way.

By Doug Eadie and Virginia Jacko

The new president of Purdue University sits on an L-shaped sofa with Virginia Jacko, a senior financial executive for the university. As they talk, Virginia thinks, "When I get up to walk out of here, I have to walk really wide, because I don't have a clue where the glass coffee table is." She has been progressively losing her vision for months, but this is her moment of truth.

As she's leaving his office, she says to herself, "This can't go on. You've got to do things differently." She shuts her office door and calls her husband, Bob.

"Bob, you know that sabbatical at

the University of Miami? How difficult would it be for you to get it in time for us to be in Miami by January 3?"

A few hours later, she walks across the hall to speak to the university treasurer. "You know I'm losing my eyesight," she says. "Well, I need to get some new skills so I can keep up with my job, so I'm applying for a three-month medical leave and enrolling at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind."

Thus ends the first stage of Virginia Jacko's extraordinary journey.

Virginia's odyssey has all the makings of a great story, even without drawing any lessons from her

experience: A young stay-at-home mother takes a part-time position as a financial analyst at Purdue University in the late 1970s. She rapidly rises through the ranks, becoming a senior financial executive who works directly with the university's president, treasurer, and provost. She is looking forward to a bright future in higher education when she is stricken with retinitis pigmentosa. Gradually losing her sight, she still manages to handle her demanding job effectively for several years.

Taking a medical leave in early 2001, she enrolls as a student at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually



Virginia Jacko, CEO of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, pictured with her guide dog.

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Impaired. Within a year, she completes her vocational rehabilitation program at the Lighthouse, resigns from Purdue, takes guide-dog training, and begins to volunteer at the Lighthouse, becoming a highly visible spokesperson in the greater Miami community. She is invited to join the Lighthouse Board of Directors in 2004, eventually becoming its treasurer. In February 2005, only four years after enrolling at the Lighthouse as a vocational rehabilitation student, Virginia becomes its interim—and that June its permanent—president and CEO, then and now one of only a handful of blind chief executives in

the United States. Since then, she has experienced tremendous success as the Lighthouse's CEO, working closely with her board to dramatically diversify Lighthouse programming and more than double revenues.

Virginia's story is the focus of our new book, *The Blind Visionary: Practical Lessons for Meeting Challenges on the Way to a More Fulfilling Life and Career*. The third part of our book consists of a dialogue on four lessons we have drawn from Virginia's amazing journey that any association executive can put to good use. Some highlights of that conversation follow.

Lesson 1: Reach Out Aggressively

Doug Eadie: Virginia, you've taken to heart the prescription that a CEO should spend no less than one third and probably more of her time dealing with external relations. I think our readers would be interested in your take on relationship building and on managing relationships with stakeholders.

Virginia Jacko: Liking people and being caring and considerate probably outweigh everything else in building relationships with the people around you. I don't think of the drivers who take me to work in the morning as stakeholders I'm managing; they're just people I like and whose help I really appreciate, and they know it. I hope I'd be polite and friendly whether I needed their help or not, but the fact is, I can pick up the phone anytime and get one of the drivers to take me someplace, and I'm sure it's because I treat them with consideration.

But there are a couple of other factors that have helped me tremendously in reaching out. For one thing, I'm who I am—what you see is what you get—whatever the situation I'm in. I think people want to know that you're not putting on one mask or another depending on who you're with at a particular time. That's what being authentic means, and one thing I've learned over the years is that most people really do want to know that they're dealing with the one real you, not some mask you've put on for the occasion.

Another thing is, I feel truly passionate about the Lighthouse mission, and my passion comes through loud and clear to people and is kind of like a magnet that attracts them to me. You can't calculate being caring, authentic, and passionate, but they're in my experience the top three relationship builders.

Lesson 2: Act on Opportunities

Doug Eadie: No one would ever accuse you of being a passive bystander, Virginia; you've led an extraordinarily action-packed life. Talk about your

approach to making decisions, especially the ones that appear to be snap decisions that might be really risky.

Virginia Jacko: You've probably heard the saying, "There are those who are presented with an opportunity and they don't see it. And then there are those who see the opportunity, but they're afraid to act on it." I like to think that over the years I've compiled a pretty good track record of not only spotting opportunities for action, but also acting.

I'm not one to sit around agonizing over decisions; you're not apt to catch me laboriously going through every last pro and con. That's just not my style. But I want you to know that I don't—I really don't—make snap judgments. I'm not inclined to take stupid risks. And that's true of some of the more dramatic decisions that might seem really impulsive, like when I called [my husband] Bob about getting the sabbatical so we could head to Miami and I could enroll in the Lighthouse, or when I called the president at Purdue and told him I wouldn't be coming back, that I'd be heading for New York for guide-dog training. You know, I never even discussed that with Bob. I made the phone call, and he came home, and I told him. But you'd be wrong if you thought I'd made snap judgments in either instance. I actually made pretty well-informed decisions that just seemed to come out of the blue. I had the pros and cons in mind when I decided what to do; I just didn't need to agonize over them.

The way my mind works, I'm always gathering information. I'm not dwelling on it, but it's like I have a little computer folder in my brain. I'm constantly putting things in that folder, but I'm not going to that folder until I need to. There's a wealth of information in that folder that I've accumulated, so when I need to make a decision, it comes into play.

That's what was happening as I was slowly losing my vision at Purdue; I started to store information in my internal computer folder about resources for people who are blind and visually



Virginia Jacko and Transition students from the Miami Lighthouse's 2008 Summer Camp swimming with the dolphins as guests at the Miami Seaquarium.

***"If you really do believe in yourself—that you're able to accomplish whatever you set out to do—whatever fears you're facing are going to seem less threatening."**—Virginia Jacko*

impaired. So when the time is right, I've got lots of information stored away, and I'm able to draw on it to make a quick decision. It's not like I'm running off half cocked. I don't think I've ever run off half cocked. I knew as my sight got worse and worse that I was going to be vulnerable, that I'd probably not be able to continue in my job someday, so I was storing up the information I'd need when I had to make a decision.

Lesson 3: Don't Let Fear Win

Doug Eadie: As you've been talking about making decisions that have turned challenges into practical, down-to-earth opportunities, Virginia, I've wondered where courage fits into this picture.

Virginia Jacko: First of all, you've got to believe in yourself. If you really do believe in yourself—that you're able to accomplish whatever you set out to do—whatever fears you're facing are going to seem less threatening. That's certainly my experience.

You and I have talked about the importance of being a positive thinker, like Norman Vincent Peale's "power of positive thinking" and Wayne Dyer's "power of intention." Maybe it's too obvious to mention, but I really do think that being a positive thinker has helped

me get over fears. It's really close to the idea of believing in myself.

I don't think I'm being a Pollyanna when I try to see the glass half full. To me, it's simple: You waste precious time and energy on negative thoughts. You've only got so much energy and you've only got so much time. And so you can choose how you spend your time. You can choose how you spend your thoughts. Spending much time on something negative is not really productive.

I really think it comes more from that attitude than that I'm such a bubbly, "Everything's OK!" type. Because I don't think that really is me; I've always been a pretty hard-headed realist. But that doesn't mean I'm negative. I just think that when you see a bump in the road, you assume you can deal with it; you don't expect it to defeat you. You tackle the bump realistically, you get over the bump, and you go on. Because that's your life. That's life. That's what it is.

Doug Eadie: You're probably one of the most ambitious people I've come across over the years, and God knows, you've been successful, but I'm 99 percent sure you'd second the notion that just shooting high and working hard don't cut it over the long haul. Without



Virginia Jacko speaks to Florida legislators at the 2009 Florida Vision Summit.

I didn't plan for it to be different in any formal way. I discovered it, this new mission, and as I've said before, it's brought powerful new meaning to my life: helping blind and visually impaired kids and adults reach their full potential. I still have "customers," like the president and provost at Purdue, but the barriers I'm helping them overcome—not only blindness, but related obstacles like low expectations and lack of access to essential technology—are so much greater than with my relatively privileged Purdue customers.

Lesson 4: Keep Things in Perspective

Doug Eadie: As I've gotten to know you and your story over the past nine months, I've concluded that your success at both Purdue and the Miami Lighthouse has a lot to do with your ability to keep things in perspective.

Virginia Jacko: A skill that's made a real difference to me over the years is not to be ruled by my ego, especially not to personalize things or hold grudges. To me, it's the future that matters, not the past, and you can't afford the negative emotion of nursing grievances or, worse, looking for revenge. Over and over again taking this positive approach has paid off.

Let me tell you a story that's on point. It was my first year as CEO, but I don't remember if I was still serving pro bono or was permanent. One of our volunteers said to a board member, talking about my appointment, "Can you believe the inmates are now running the asylum?" referring to me as an inmate. I didn't hear this directly, but another board member I trust repeated it to me, and a blind board member who heard it was outraged and asked other board members, "Can you believe what so-and-so said about Virginia?"

At the time, I just chuckled to myself; it didn't seem worth getting angry about. Well, this particular volunteer who'd made the comment came to the Lighthouse to see me one day and said, "Virginia, I'm so upset with you that you can't take a joke. This whole thing

is being stirred up with the board." I responded, "I'm really sorry. What you said was pretty inappropriate, but I'm not the one who's been talking about this with board members. However, it's not going to do you or me any good if we hang onto this, if we don't work together and try to have a collegial relationship. So, I'll make a deal with you. I'll forget what you said, and then you forget what some of my board members said about you."

It seemed to me that the meeting went well; I wasn't sure, but I thought I'd turned him around, which felt good and worth the effort. I didn't really share that with anyone, because you say negative stuff and it becomes like a snowball. So I just forgot about it. I'm really able to forget about stuff where some other people might dwell on it and think about it.

By the way, the ending was happy. I was so honored when the fellow who'd made the bad joke called me a couple of years later and said, "Virginia, I want to nominate you for an award." Then I knew it'd ended the way I wanted.

It wouldn't have done any good for me to have gotten huffy and taken him on with, "How dare you say something bad about me!" Instead I kind of laughed it off, and we made the deal to forget the whole thing and move ahead. As I say, it's an approach that's worked well for me over the years. **an**

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a pretty good sense of why, at a really fundamental level, you're engaged in whatever job you're doing—what contribution you're aiming to make—you're just as likely to make the wrong decisions as the right ones, don't you think?

Virginia Jacko: Having a sense of mission has been tremendously important to me. I'm absolutely certain it's helped me get through some really rough patches in my life; it's certainly helped me not give in to whatever fears I've been feeling.

As we've talked about my time at Purdue and my Lighthouse experience, two things have gotten clearer to me about mission, at least as it's played out in my life. First, I don't think I've ever really consciously or deliberately tried to define my mission—not ever, as far as I recall—as part of some kind of formal planning exercise. I'm not saying that I haven't given a lot of thought to my calling at one time or another; just that it seems to have come out of my experience, like a discovery, rather than some kind of plan. The more I think about it, the more clearly I see that my mission has evolved over time, hasn't been a static thing.

My mission has definitely changed since I've come to the Lighthouse.