Brian: If somebody from Wyoming called and said, "You know, my dad's starting to lose their sight. What do we do?" And within five or ten minutes, Patrick and Michelle would be able to get them, kind of, to a point to where, you know, whether they're getting, contacting their local NFB or American Foundation for the Blind or one of those organizations, where they would be able to get some help quickly. Whereas, you know, we wandered for, eleven or twelve months before we received any assistance. I do believe if, if somebody'd told me about the My Tools for Living store and we would have called up there, you know, my journey to get out to the Colorado Center for the Blind would have been a lot quicker than what it ended up being.

Chris: This is the Penny Forward podcast, a show about blind people building bright futures one penny at a time. I'm Chris Peterson.

Liz: I'm Liz Bottner.

MOe: I'm MOe Carpenter.

Chris: And, one of the things that we have learned over the last few years, is that, finding accessible products is one of the most important, and also anxiety inducing, things that we as blind and low vision people have to deal with in our daily lives. And so, we, back in November, started partnering with the Chicago Lighthouse to offer the Penny Forward shop. And this is an outgrowth of something that the Chicago Lighthouse calls the My Tools for Living store. It offers two hundred and seventy-one products, All accessible. There are products at just about any price point. We have things going from kitchen items or braille paper or bump dots, all the way up through expensive assistive technology, like the Nvision glasses, the Lyric text reader, uh, lots of different video magnifiers from HumanWare and other companies, and, and we'll be talking about some of those products now. one of the neat things about this, though, is that the shop not only offers the products, but it also offers an experience that is aimed at helping you to pick the right product the first time, so that you don't have to worry about spending your limited income on stuff that you don't need. Something that we feel is really important here at Penny Forward. So we've brought on Patrick Andrade and Brian Bussard from the Chicago Lighthouse to talk about this new partnership with them, and what the My Tools for Living store has to offer. Patrick and Brian, thanks for being here. Welcome.

Patrick: Thank you so much for having me.

Brian: Thank you for having us.

Chris: Before we get into things real deeply, can we just ask you to tell us a little bit about yourselves, and your blindness or connection to the blind community? Brian, let's start with you, and then pass it over to Patrick if you would.

Brian: Well, um, I came through the Lighthouse just over a year ago, and my wife and I had a pretty interesting struggle along the way. 2016 I went suddenly blind, and we, we joke about it that we kind of wandered in the darkness for a year until we got any help, after being sent home multiple times by multiple doctors, and I've had many blind friends tell me the same story, just from a different part of the country. And after being around the Lighthouse for some other things, I was approached about coming on board as the outreach specialist. And, uh, started a year ago, almost exactly a year ago.

Chris: Patrick, how about you?

Patrick: Yes. I, uh, I myself am fully sighted. But I got, luckily brought into this, uh, this great community, by happenstance. I was a high school student that enjoyed volunteering in the Chicago Land area, and one of the places I volunteered at was the Chicago Lighthouse. When I ended up going to college, I was also in need of some kind of internship to sustain myself, and I approached the lighthouse about possibly working there. I had IT, uh, experience, and so, I thought it could be a great opportunity to work with a community that I have come to enjoy being a part of, while not being low vision or blind, but everyone's welcomed me graciously, and, yeah. I would say it's been really lucky, because from there I was able to connect with all the programs that we have, I became a counselor for one of our first job programs where I worked at a Walgreens with a low vision teenager for about six weeks. I also was a counselor for one of our summer camps that we have called Summer in the City, where teens from across Illinois come to Chicago and stay in the UIC dorms, uh, and we travel around the city for a full week practicing orientation and mobility skills, and going on transit, and experiencing new opportunities. And I became friends with everyone in the community, and it became a great place for me to find work, and be around everything that I enjoy. Uh, so, I was very lucky to have the position that I'm in now open up, when I graduated college. And I've been here ever since.

Liz: For those listeners who may not be familiar with the Chicago Lighthouse, can you give a brief overview of what it is and what it does?

Patrick: Yeah. So the Chicago Lighthouse is a nonprofit that, uh, our mission is for low vision, uh, blind, veterans, low vision and blind individuals, as well as veterans, and anyone with a disability. Um, so, we offer a variety of services. We try and say from birth to helping those age gracefully, as they get older in their years. And so we have a school, we're able to provide opportunities through job placements, uh, with our employment services programming where they work with the department of human services to help create job placements, and, uh, enforce job retention, for individuals in the community, as well as, we have our low vision clinic, where we offer comprehensive services of occupational therapy, assistive technology, psychology, and low vision optometrists who can offer prescriptions for glasses, as well as contacts.

MOe: So, going with, uh, more of an overview of what your shop offers, what are some of the price ranges, and maybe some more of the customers that you can serve?

Patrick: Yeah. So, in addition to being our store, I also like to consider it our E-commerce store, we have our regular store, uh, where we house all of the products. People like to call it our emporium. (Chuckle.) Uh, but I also like to consider what we have online as a really great resource hub. So our customers are really anyone who might be experiencing low vision or blindness themselves, or might be a family member who, or a friend, who knows someone or is connected to someone who is experiencing vision loss, or maybe they are, have been blind since birth and are just looking for tools, maybe a Christmas gift. Our customers are really anyone, of all ages, I would say, since we try and carry products that include, uh, younger toys, marketed towards children, as well as games that could be used for thing's like bridge for adults. So, a lot of the time, majority of our customers are those that we're seeing through the low vision clinic since our programming here is very comprehensive, but by having the My Tools for Living store online, it's been great having the ability to reach the customers that are across the country. And, so, having those that are utilizing Penny Forward's services be able to receive the tools that we carry, um, has been very great, and, it's great to know that the resources and devices we're providing can actually reach those who are in need.

Chris: Yeah, and there's just a ton of stuff. As a parent, I just want to throw out some things that, that I got, for me to interact with my kids. There's things like, rattling soccer ball. Uh, my five-year-old's really into soccer these days. And, uh, tactile twister. Which I haven't tried yet, but I'm super excited. So, you know, there's all kinds of fun stuff, but also some really advanced technology that can help people to use the vision that they have more effectively, or maybe even, uh, continue to live independently, uh, without any vision at all. And Patrick, if you would, could you talk about some of those more advanced products and, and maybe what they do, and how you support people finding the right ones?

Patrick: Yes. Happily. Uh, so, what's been great about the E-commerce site is, although it has far reach, it's been able to offer individuals who are in search of these high tech items a better way of navigating and combing through everything that's out there that exists. So with the quiz that we've put on our E-commerce site for anyone who utilizes My Tools, you're able to answer some basic questions that you would know about your vision, and your goals. And from there, it's going to output a better selection of things that could actually meet you with what you're trying to do. Some of these devices could be the Humanware or Clover Book tablet size magnifiers that offer distance magnification for students maybe in the classroom, or college students. There's readers, so, we offer the Lyric devices, as you had mentioned earlier, which are great for individuals that might have more difficulty with remembering different kinds of buttons. And so, by the fact that, it's completely a weight sensitive tray, that, when it has paper on top of it, will take the photo and read immediately. It's a great device for those that might be experiencing some cognitive issues as well, or memory loss. And we're always looking for the next and best, but that's not to say that we're always grabbing what everyone might be talking about, because we're very picky about what we carry. Uh, what I'll say is, I have strong opinions about many products, and I'm not afraid to share them. I think someone should be vetting these products in the community with some strength, because a lot of times, there's good marketing that can convince people they can do things that they really can't do. And so, uh, we want to be the person that's being truthful in what the customer's going to receive, as well as help them decide whether it's the right device for them, even if they do receive it. So, we're going to give them in person or virtual training, if that's possible. All of our assistive technology specialists are, uh, well trained with, um, working with those in the community in terms of what's needed, and providing training. Uh, everything's very, always audio descriptive, we even have audio descriptive tutorials on products on our YouTube page. So, individuals can get the whole low down on what the product can do, if they're unable to even see it in person in what we would call our emporium. Our store. And, yeah. So there's plenty of opportunities for us to even connect you with places where you can maybe even rent these devices, and then we can work with you to train you on the device that you've gotten for rent. So that, in the end, you know that your money you're spending is going to be well spent. My nightmare scenario is someone having a device and it ends up in a drawer. Uh, or in their basement, and isn't as helpful as it was once thought to be.

Liz: You mentioned nightmare scenarios, are there any success stories that you would be willing to share of individuals who have contacted you through the My Tools for Living store, and purchased something, or rented a device, as appropriate, and had success with doing that?

Patrick: Yeah. Happily. I, there's actually a, a great case that we had where an individual took the quiz online, and whenever someone takes the quiz, I do reach out, um, since the E-mail is provided to get your quiz results back. With that E-mail that is shared, I reach out one time to allow the person to connect with me if they have any further questions, and when I'm reaching out, I'm always letting them know that, beyond the devices that they saw that have maybe an extreme cost, since these types of readers can usually start around two thousand, and go anywhere up to five thousand at times if they include magnification. And so, we want the individual to know that that's not the only thing that's out there. In addition, if they have their own technology, we can train them on how to utilize their technology more proficiently, and utilize the accessibility features within. And so, uh, there was one client that I reached out to, that had taken the quiz, was a little unnerved by how expensive everything is, as one would be, since it's pretty hard to pay out of pocket, uh, for something that's two thousand dollars when you're just trying to use it to read and level the playing field with yourself with a sighted individual. So, this individual wasn't very happy with all the devices they found in, in terms of the cost, but they were happy to know that there's apps out there for the Iphone that they already have, or the Android phone that they already have. In addition, they were actually a farmer. And so what they were looking for was a way that they could maybe use a reader to read the tags on their, uh, when they tag their cows. And so, something that I haven't come across before, being in a city, but we were determined to help him make it work, and, from there, it wasn't even necessarily a assistive technology device that one would think of to utilize. We connected them with the Way Around tags. And so those are tags where you can input label information, and scan it with the NFC scanner that's on your phone. And so this is much better for an individual with low vision or blindness, because you can be about four inches away from the NFC tag, and it would still pick it up. So, for many devices, you would maybe struggle to, maybe pinpoint the label and touch it with the device you would need, uh, to touch it with for it to read out loud. But in this case, it's a little bit easier. And so, this farmer was then able to successfully tag his cows, without even needing things like internet access. Because he was also in an area where there was limited accessibility to internet. Uh, so, that's one success story that we had, where, um, although the person wasn't actually buying some of the large assistive technology that we sell, we were still able to connect them with a tool that maybe is a little bit, is high tech, but lower cost, and can do everything that they need.

MOe: I just personally have to say, I love Way Around tags, and the Way Around system, and I'm glad that, even if it's not something you carry in your store, you're happy to recommend products that might be a little off the beatin' path. Um, speaking of the products you do have, and things that you do offer, what do you have in store for the future?

Patrick: Great question. So, when it comes to products, if we don't carry it, we're always happy to take suggestions as well, so, Way Around tags is, luckily something that we've worked with Way Around to be able to carry in our store, so we're happy to offer those to individuals, but when it comes to what's next, lots of people are talking about the wearable glasses these days. For a good reason. AI is expanding. And I think what's really next for us in My Tools, beyond selling products, one thing I'll say is, we're looking to get the Meta glasses. I do have some gripes with them in terms of my knowledge that it isn't intentionally designed or created for those with low vision or blindness, and so there are ways in which, um, users are going to have to mitigate the, the quirks of the device, because of the fact that they have not done universal design, is what I'd say. Um, it's a great device for the fact that it can connect individuals to Aira, or Be My Eyes, in a hands free way, um, as long as they're pretty proficient with their cell phone. So, what I'd like to say is, I'm looking to take the My Tools for Living store into the next step as, in terms of being a resource hub. I would love it to be a place where individuals can go, no matter where they are in the country, and, although they know it's connected to the Chicago Lighthouse, the Chicago Lighthouse is there to assist them in finding, uh, which path they should take, um, depending on where they are. And providing them with the, the knowledge and the resources, like Brian had said like he was wandering through the dark f, and, so, as a lighthouse, we've go! to show that light.

Chris: It can be so hard to know whether a product that you're about to buy is, is going to be the right product. And, and, uh, um, it's something that's just discussed over and over again across the blind community. Or at least the corners of it that I inhabit. I want to check in, uh, briefly with you, Brian, just to see if you have anything to add. We haven't, uh, we haven't heard much from you, um, and, uh, as the outreach specialist for the My Tools for Living store, I'm sure that there must be some details that you feel are important to share.

Brian: Yeah. One of the things that I think we need to, uh, to mention is that, after being around the lighthouse here for the last few years, I really do believe if somebody from, you know, I, Patrick and I talked about this earlier, that if somebody from Wyoming called and said, "You know, my dad's starting to lose their sight. What do we do?" And within five or ten minutes, Patrick and Michelle would be able to get them, kind of, to a point to where, you know, whether they're getting, contacting their local NFB or American Foundation for the Blind or one of those organizations, where they would be able to get some help quickly. Whereas, you know, we wandered for, eleven or twelve months before we received any assistance. I do believe if, if somebody'd told me about the My Tools for Living store and we would have called up there, you know, my journey to get out to the Colorado Center for the Blind would have been a lot quicker than what it ended up being. Um, just because I would have gotten a connection of where does, where do you start? You know. The worst thing you can do as a blind person is have somebody google, "I'm going blind. What do I do now?" Some of the stuff that comes up, yeah. You should not read, 'cause it's, (pause.) You'll end up being miserable, sitting on your couch, scared to go outside, uh, because the world's gonna run you over or something. And that's not the case at all.

Patrick: Yeah. I, I want to just add as well, Brian had, always shared with me, his success stories too. Brian, I don't know if you could share the story about how you've been connecting those even just like with our blog, um, giving them all the tips and tricks that we like to share in our My Tools Tips part of the website, where, for example, we guide individuals who are maybe looking to buy a new phone. Maybe they have a senior parent that is trying to age gracefully, and is losing their vision. And they want to know, "Can I buy them an IPhone? Can they still use a smartphone?"

Brian: I'm a, President of my local Lions club chapter here, and I had uh, our district governor contact me, and one of our other clubs in our district, said he had two older ladies come to the club, and they wanted to get cell phones, and they're losing their sight, and, where do you, what do you do, where do you start, how do I, how do you get somebody to learn how to use a cell phone? Well the first thing I did is I got home and I looked up the, uh, I knew there had to be a blog post about it because there's, they have so many, there's so many posts. Um, and I found a really good description on the Blindshell phone, and I think we carry a second one as well, um, and I was able to get that resource to them quickly through their Lions Club. Um, and then the other thing I did too is I said, I said "If they're familiar with how an IPhone works, or another smart phone, I said "realist - and they already have the phone, they just don't know how to use it," I said "If somebody could get me to, to them at a library or whatever else," I said, "I can sit down and teach someone how to use an iPhone, or a, an Android phone for that matter, just being a resource available to them." But having a blog available, with all of the information on it, was really quick to get to, and it's very comprehensive on the description of the product, and, the ability to get it.

Liz: For listeners who might be listening who are going through changes in their vision, and are not able to access the technology that they maybe once were able to access having vision, or maybe they are losing their vision and they have never been good at technology, and they're just thinking, "I, I can't do any of this. I'm just gonna have people do all this for me." What is one piece of advice that, Patrick and Brian, that either of you would give them?

Patrick: I would say, if the ophthalmologist says to you, "There's nothing more I can do," don't listen to them. (Laugh.) Um, because, at the lighthouse, we like to say, "There's always something we can do," and, I carry that through in, in the work that I do, and and trying to connect someone, because there always is, with what they need, because there always is a next step. And it's just finding that next step. And, so, although it's hard to, sometimes, maintain composure and retain hope. There's always going to be the Chicago Lighthouse and the My Tools for Living store existing, and there when you need it.

Brian: Yeah, and, one thing I think as well too is, if you are losing your sight, or you have a family member that's losing their sight, if you can get plugged into a low vision support group, in your area, or even an online group, there are some organizations that do online meet-ups, if you're able to get online. You can learn a ton of stuff, just from other blind people. A lot of times, I've learned shortcuts on apps. You know, I'm going a long way around something and one of my blind person's like, "You're doing it the hard way. This, you know, there's a quicker way to do that." Just getting into a community, and connecting with a community of, uh, people kind of in a similar situation can really just improve your mental health just 'cause you don't feel like you're walking through it alone.

MOe: Well thanks, Guys. We are running short on time here, so could you tell us how to find the shop, and contact you guys.

Patrick: Yes. For anyone looking to purchase from the Penny Forward shop, you can go to

shop.pennyforward.com

If you're looking to contact us by phone, you can reach us at 1800-919-3375, and we are open Monday to Friday 9 to 5. If you do have any questions and would like to E-mail, we have an E-mail that's store, S T O R E, at Chicago Lighthouse dot org. So, Chicago Lighthouse.org

store@chicagolighthouse.org

And, Brian, if anyone is listening, uh, how could they reach you if they're interested in getting set up with the My Tools for Living Store, and possibly getting the link put on their optometric site?

Brian: Uh, I can be reached at, uh, my direct phone line is 312-997-3646, my E-mail address is B R I A N, dot B U S S A R D, at Chicago Lighthouse dot org.

Chris: And for the sake of transparency, could you describe for the listeners how this partnership between Penny Forward and the Chicago Lighthouse works, in terms of the, the funding, what money goes where, etc. so they know where their dollars are going to?

Patrick: Exactly. Would be happy to. So, every dollar that's spent within the My Tools for Living store goes back into the programs of the Chicago Lighthouse, and the profits also go to Penny Forward, in order to keep both of our organizations alive and thriving.

Chris: all right, well thank you Patrick and Brian, it's been a great time with you today. Really appreciate all the wonderful information, and, uh, hope we can have you back on again sometime soon.

Patrick: I would love that.

Brian: Any time.

Chris: If you want to visit the Penny Forward My Tools for Living shop, again, you can visit that online at

shop.pennyforward.com

and you can also call 800-919-3375. Again, that's 800-919-3375, tell them Penny Forward sent you. Before we go, we'd like to thank our valued partners, the APH Connect Center, and World Services for the Blind, and our sponsors, Well's Fargo, Thrivent, and now, the Nazdac Foundation. If you'd like to learn more about sponsoring Penny Forward, visit our sponsorships page at

www.pennyforward.com/sponsorships

and if one of our premade packages doesn't work out for you, don't give up. Send us an E-mail to

sponsorships@pennyforward.com

we'd be happy to discuss a custom package with you.

The Penny Forward Podcast is produced by Chris Peterson and Liz Bottner with help from MOe Carpenter. Audio editing and post production is provided by Brynn Lowden! She got married. So it's the same person, just a different last name. Transcription is provided by Anne Verduin, the music is composed and performed by Andre Louis, and all of those people are blind. Penny Forward is a nonprofit organization supported by your memberships and donations. We provide accessible financial literacy education online courses, weekly workshops, and one to one financial counseling, and for those of you who may be experiencing vision loss as something new in your life, we're happy to try and help you find a path forward rather than wandering around in the dark as well. Visit our website at

www.pennyforward.com

to find out how you can join our community, or donate to support our work. Now, for all of us in the Penny Forward community, I'm Chris Peterson.

Liz: I'm Liz Bottner.

MOe: I'm MOe Carpenter.

Chris: Thanks for listening, and have a great week.