**Stephanie Bretz consumer success story - FINAL**

***Ohio woman enjoys online communities through iCanConnect***

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Stephanie Bretz was born with profound hearing loss in both ears. Cochlear implants helped improve her hearing, but around the age of 40, she faced a new challenge: low vision, resulting from retinitis pigmentosa.

“It was a pretty traumatic change in my life,” said the 59-year-old resident of Columbus, Ohio. “I had to go through a major education.”

Stephanie learned about iCanConnect, also known as the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program, through the Ohio Deaf-Blind program. In 2014, iCanConnect provided her with an iPhone, iPad and Braille Sense U2, which she says changed her life.

“I had no experience whatsoever,” said the mother of two, who retired from the Red Cross that same year. “I thought there was no way I would even have a cell phone. I thought I was just going to sit here for the rest of my life. I felt very isolated. It was kind of depressing.”

Stephanie’s iCanConnect trainer showed her how to use her iPad, which gave her the confidence to embrace the iPhone. “I really loved all the things I could do with it,” she said.

She now uses her iPhone to text her daughters and husband – “especially when he goes out of town, it’s wonderful.” Her Braille Sense U2, a portable braille notetaker, allows her to use Braille when online for accessing the web and emails.

She also uses the Braille Sense to communicate with a friend who is deaf-blind. “We’re able to go on Facebook together, and we can read each other’s pages and make comments,” she said.“It’s definitely connecting with another world.”

Stephanie uses her iPhone and iPad for Facebook, and to participate in online poetry, deaf-blind and disability forums. “Everyone is spread out,” she said of her state’s deaf-blind community. They meet in person at gatherings for the Ohio Deaf-Blind Association, but otherwise they chat online, discussing health and political issues.

There’s even an online group for older users of technology, where members share tips and tricks, she said. “You never get tired of that. It’s just a great sense of communication.”

Stephanie actively recruits friends to apply to iCanConnect, because she believes the tools are life-altering.

“I have this one friend, who is hard of hearing, and she’s pretty isolated. I’ve been begging her to join the program,” she said. “It’s been an exciting journey. I just keep wanting to learn more.”