Vol. 7, October, 2013

The Blind Canadian

A publication of the Canadian Federation of the Blind

In this issue:

- New Project: iPhones for the blind
- The reality of blindness simulations
- A blind woman's request for blindness skills training

CFB

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is not an organization speaking for the blind – it is the blind speaking for themselves.

CFB

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is a non-profit, grassroots organization created by and for Blind Canadians. Its mandate is to improve the lives of blind people across the country through:

- blind people mentoring blind people;
- public education about the abilities of blind people;
- advocacy to create better opportunities and training for blind Canadians.

The long white cane is a symbol of empowerment and a tool for independence.

With proper training, opportunity and a positive attitude, blindness is nothing more than a characteristic. Blind people can do almost everything sighted people can do; sometimes they just use alternative techniques to get the job done.

We are educated. We have skills. We are independent. We are parents. We are teachers. We have wisdom. We represent the same range of human diversity, strengths and weaknesses as any other sector of the population.

The CFB would like to realize a positive future for all people who are blind. A future where blind people can find employment; a future where blind people are valued for their contributions; a future where blind people are treated like anyone else.

This future involves you. No matter who you are, blind or sighted, you can work with us to realize this dream.

Together, we can create change in our social landscape, for the real barriers blind people face are erected by ignorance and misunderstanding. Help us achieve what we all want: to be treated with dignity and respect. Join us today and be a part of the solution.

Our Philosophy

We are not an organization speaking on behalf of blind people; rather we are an organization of blind people speaking for ourselves.

We believe it is respectable to be blind.

We believe that with proper training and opportunity, blind people can compete on terms of equality with their sighted peers.

We believe the real problem of blindness is not the lack of eyesight. The real problem is the lack of positive information about blindness and the achievements of blind people.

CFB

Committed to the
equality of blind Canadians

The Blind Canadian

A publication of the Canadian Federation of the Blind

The **Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)** is a not-for-profit, entirely volunteer, grass roots organization, incorporated on June 2nd, 1999.

The Blind Canadian offers a positive philosophy of blindness; serves as a vehicle for advocacy and civil rights; addresses social concerns affecting the blind; discusses issues relating to employment, education, legislation and rehabilitation; and provides news of products and technology used by blind people.

We publish two issues annually of “The Blind Canadian” targeted at educating members of the general public about blindness and issues blind Canadians face. It is the leading publication of the CFB; it covers the events and activities of the CFB and addresses the issues and concerns of blind Canadians. Look for the magazine at **www.cfb.ca** in print, Braille, or audio downloadable form, or request a physical copy.

Thanks to an agreement with Public Sector Publications, businesses are offered the opportunity to advertise in the print edition; the print magazine is widely distributed.

To add individuals or community organizations to the mailing list, please email us at: info@cfb.ca.

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The Blind Canadian welcomes articles, resources and letters to the editor for possible publication in The Blind Canadian. For further details, subscription requests or to make a submission, contact us at:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Another Awesome Year of CFB Accomplishments

By Doris Belusic

CFB has been busy! Here's a look at our accomplishments over the past year, from our Annual General Meeting in May 2012 to our recent AGM of June 2013.

Intensive Blindness Skills Rehabilitation Advocacy

As always, our first and foremost project is to advocate for the need of Federation-style intensive blindness skills training for blind Canadians who want it. Blind Canadians need access to this type of quality blindness skills training, which would improve many blind people's independence, confidence, employability — ultimately, improve lives.

Until Canada has quality Federation-style immersion blindness skills training, we will keep advocating for government funded and accountable blindness skills training, so that blind Canadians may attend the world-renowned training centres located in the U.S. for their 9-month intensive programs - Louisiana Center for the Blind; Colorado Center for the Blind; and Blind Learning in New Dimensions (BLIND Inc) in Minnesota.

Graduates from these centres come away with independent life skills, travel skills, technology skills, Braille skills, employment-ready skills, as well as the equally important fundamentals of problem-solving, self advocacy, self confidence, high expectations, a positive perspective on blindness with a 'can do' attitude, recognizing potential and just plain feeling good about oneself. Graduates witness very capable blind role models, including their blind instructors and blind centre directors.

For more information on this topic, visit www.cfb.ca to read articles from previous issues of the Blind Canadian magazine:
-It's Been Two Years Since Rally (Vol 6)
-The Link Between Proper Blindness Skills Training and Opportunity (Vol 6)
-Blind British Columbians Demand Publicly Funded and Publicly Accountable Training at Budget Consultation Hearing (Vol 6)
-The Sorry State of Blindness Training in Canada (Vol 5)
-The Official CFB Position Statement on the Rehabilitation of Blind Canadians (in this issue)
-Rally for Change and Choice (Vol 5)
-My Journey at the Louisiana Center for the Blind (Vol 5)
-My Experiences Training at the Colorado Center for the Blind (Vol 5)

National Federation of the Blind (NFB) Conventions

Another large part of what we do is inform and expose blind Canadians to the huge benefits of attending the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) national conventions, held each year in the U.S. Most blind Canadians have not heard about this important blindness event. This gathering for learning about blindness is the largest in the world, organized and run by the blind, for 2,500 to over 3,000 blind attendees.

We highly recommend and offer funding so that blind people can attend this event, as it offers a life-changing experience. A blind person comes away from this week-long event with a lot of information in many areas, including adaptive technology, as well as inspiration, empowerment, and a better perspective on blindness. The event showcases the capabilities and accomplishments of blind people and actively demonstrates that blindness need not be a barrier to a full and successful life, and that being blind is respectable and totally OK. Witnessing and learning all this greatly benefits a person in his or her daily life.

We are happy to say that CFB has been able to support many blind individuals over the years to attend this event.

For more information on this topic, visit www.cfb.ca to read articles from previous issues of the Blind Canadian magazine:
-Memories of Dallas 2012 NFB Convention (Vol 6)
-Our Experiences with the Federation and the National Federation of the Blind Convention in Dallas, Texas, July 2006 (Vol 3)
-A Thank You Letter from an NFB Convention Attendee (Vol 3)
-Benefits of Attending National Federation of the Blind Conventions (Vol 3)
-An Awesome Adventure: My First Experience at an NFB Convention (Vol 2)
-Convention Blues (Vol 2)
-U.S. National Federation of the Blind Convention (Vol 1)

Walking Proud Program and CFB White Cane Day

We are still providing long white rigid canes, funds permitting, to blind Canadians across the country, thanks to funds raised through the Thrifty Foods Smile Card Program.

We hold white cane walks where blind people mentor one another to gain travel skills. October 15 is CFB White Cane Day, where we celebrate this wonderful tool of independence, empowerment and pride. (See article in The Blind Canadian, Vol 6)

Lion's iPhone Project for the Blind

CFB and the Lions have partnered to bring the unlocked iPhone 5 with Siri to blind people. This phone has proved to be a very popular and valuable tool for the blind. *(See article in this issue.)*

Advocacy Work

Members have worked on advocacy in many areas this past year. Besides advocating for proper intensive blindness skills training, we've worked toward having an inclusive, equitable, publicly funded, publicly accountable and publicly run library service for the blind and print disabled, through public libraries. *(See article in the issue and in The Blind Canadian, Vol 6.)* We've also worked regarding accessibility and policy at Library and Archives Canada. We've advocated for B.C. Transit accessibility *(See article in The Blind Canadian, Vol 6)*; changed West Jet's policy on storage of our long white canes *(See article in this issue)*; and won a discrimination case at the TC10K run in Victoria, B.C. *(See article in The Blind Canadian, Vol 6.)*

Charity Status

During the past year, CFB has received Charity Status. We are a non profit organization, but now we can issue charity tax receipts, as well, we are in a position to apply for more helpful grants.

The Blind Canadian Magazine

We have partnered with Public Sector Publications and are publishing 2 issues per year of our leading magazine, 'The Blind Canadian'. It is chocker-block full of information about blindness and issues related to blindness, geared toward the general public. Articles are written by mostly blind people and the magazine is edited by blind people. It is available in print and also on our website www.cfb.ca in many formats, including downloadable Braille.

Children's Magazines and Hospital Veteran's Journal

Through Public Sector Publications, CFB sponsors 5 children's magazines and a veteran's journal during the year. As a sponsor, we provide blindness information for these magazines and, in return, receive honorariums. The children's books can also be read in Braille through our website www.cfb.ca.

Upgrade of our Systems

This year we upgraded our telephone system, our website www.cfb.ca, and started up with TeamTalk, an internet-based conference room, where we've held 'Blind People on the Move' and iPhone seminars. We also recently held a Facebook contest and increased our 'likes'.

Telephone and Internet Inquiries

We are receiving increased communication by both telephone and internet email through our website. Many inquiries are from blind individuals, their families or friends, as well as from professionals.

CFB Ebay Fundraiser

Some CFB members have learned the skills of listing and selling items on the Ebay internet auction and through this, raised significant funds for CFB. Please contact cfb@outofsightdeals.com if you have any new, gently used, or antique items you'd like to donate. We ask that items weigh under 2 kg and have a value over $50. Thank you so kindly for your generous support.

Growth of the Federation

In Canada, Federationism started in 1992. Last year, 2012, we celebrated 20 years! *(See article, Federationism Celebrates 20 Years in Canada (Vol 5).*

Word of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) is spreading year by year. We are in contact with blind people from across the country and we are growing, including a recent launch in Nanaimo, B.C.

Supporters

CFB has some wonderful supporters who have donated their time and funds to benefit our cause during the past year. We greatly appreciate your generosity and kindness. A special thank you to Peter Cavin of Country Grocer, Thelma Fayle and Daryl Jones, Victoria Imperial Lions Club, Peter Lockie, and Knights of Columbus in Kelowna.

Monthly Meetings and Socials

We hold regular monthly meetings in person in Victoria, B.C. and via speaker phone with those who join in from across Canada. And, in December, we held a very enjoyable CFB Christmas social.

Resolutions on CFB Policy

During this year, we adopted 2 resolutions which confirm our beliefs and guide our actions. We adopted a resolution about blindfolding and other simulations of blindness, which states that blindness simulations by the average sighted person generally only results in reinforcement of the misconceptions and misunderstandings of blindness and does not produce awareness of the realities of 'what it's like to be blind'. *(See 4 articles on this topic in this issue.)*

The other resolution we adopted is a Re-Affirmation on Blindness Skills Training, which states our beliefs about the kind of blindness skills training we are wanting for blind Canadians. (See the resolution in this issue.)

Members

A big thank you to all of our members who devote time and energy working to create positive change for the situation of the blind in Canada and for truly making a difference. Without your devoted, continuous and competent efforts, the work of CFB would not happen.

Now, on with the next year!

Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) Elects New Executive Board 2013

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) elected a new executive board at its annual general meeting on June 8, 2013 in Victoria, B.C. All members of the executive are blind and serve without compensation.

Doris Belusic stepped aside from the position of secretary after 10 years of service, but will continue as an active member and editor of CFB's 'The Blind Canadian' magazine.

Members elected Oriano Belusic as first vice president, Gail Copp as secretary and re-elected Heidi Propp as member at large. Members are grateful to Mary Ellen Gabias, president; Dr. Paul Gabias, second vice president; Graeme McCreath, treasurer; and Elizabeth Lalonde, immediate past president, for their continued hard work and service.

Congratulations and thank you to the new executive board.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is an organization of blind people committed to the equality and empowerment of blind Canadians. Through advocacy, public education and mentoring, members work for change, promote a positive perspective on blindness and together gain confidence and skills.

Executive Members of the CFB

Mary Ellen Gabias, president, is a board member of the American Action Fund for Blind Children and Adults, and a national and international employment advisor for the blind. Mary Ellen has more than 35 years of experience in work with blind people, including rehabilitation counselling, work with blind seniors and program development.

Before immigrating to Canada, she served as Assistant Director of the Job Opportunities for the Blind project of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the United States where she created and taught a career information curriculum to more than two thousand program participants. Since coming to Canada in 1989, Mary Ellen has served as the editor for a national blindness magazine and is a co-founder of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB). Mary Ellen and husband, Paul, are the parents of four children ages 14 - 23.

Oriano Belusic, first vice president, was born in Croatia. At age 11, he immigrated to Canada with his family. He attended schools for the blind in Zagreb, Croatia and in Vancouver, B.C., and later, public school in Victoria, B.C. Oriano graduated from the University of Victoria with a Bachelor of Science in Economics.

Oriano has his own business in adaptive computer equipment for the blind and has been a general contractor, having built three houses along with his wife.

Oriano is a founding member of CFB and was its first president. He is an active member of the Victoria Imperial Lions Club.

Dr. Paul Gabias, second vice president, was born in Montreal and obtained his Ph.D. from New York University in 1988. He currently works as an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, where he has developed several courses, including courses in tactile perception and in the psychological aspects of advocacy. Dr. Gabias founded the CFB and holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Victoria in recognition of his pioneering work improving opportunities for the blind of Canada.

In the United States, he served as president of the National Association of Guide Dog Users, a national division of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and was the founder and president of the NFB of Northern Nevada.

For the past 13 years, he has been an independent Wellness Consultant associated with the Nikken Corporation, marketing wellness products through the direct sales industry. Dr. Gabias lives in Kelowna, B.C. with his wife Mary Ellen and their four children, Joanne, (23) Jeffrey, (20) Philip (16) and Elliott (14).

Gail Copp, secretary, has worked in the blind community through volunteering with the Victoria Blind Curling Club, teaching a course in the basics of Braille through the Esquimalt Recreation Centre and as an assistant for blind students at the Victoria School District. Gail currently works as a software developer for an IT consulting company in Vancouver, BC.

Graeme McCreath, treasurer, was born in Liverpool, England where he attended a school for the blind and attended a physiotherapy training program in London, specifically designed for blind students. After immigrating to Canada, Graeme worked at the Victoria General Hospital for several years before opening his own physiotherapy practice in Victoria, B.C. with his wife. He is the author of the book, 'The Politics of Blindness'. Graeme and his wife have 3 adult children.

Heidi Propp, member at large, studied psychology at the University of Victoria. Heidi's goals are to attend the Colorado Training Center for the Blind in the U.S., to help bring a blindness skills training centre to Canada, and be part of realizing the dream of full, equal participation in society for blind Canadians.

Elizabeth Lalonde, immediate past president, has extensive personal and professional experience in the field of blindness. Elizabeth recently completed a 9-month intensive blindness immersion training program at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. After earning a BA with a double major in journalism and anthropology from the University of Victoria, she worked as a communications coordinator for the Province of British Columbia, and served as president of the CFB from 2003 to 2012. Elizabeth is the mother of 2 young boys.

An Absence of Intensive Training and Rehabilitation for Blind People in Canada

From the editor: It has been almost 3 years since February 2011 when blind British Columbians spoke out on the B.C. Legislature steps in efforts to tell government and the public that there is a severe lack and an immediate need for quality, publicly funded and accountable immersion-style intensive blindness skills training (including pre-employment skills training) for blind Canadian adults who want it. Government has an obligation to care for the basic needs and rights of its citizens, but so far, many blind adults are left holding the bag of limited skills, limited independence and confidence, and a very high unemployment rate - a rate which would never be tolerated in the general population.

Many blind people have so much potential and so much to offer society. It is shameful for government to ignore its obligation to provide blind people with this important, essential training. Many blind people's lives could improve quite dramatically. Pawning blind people over to a charity for very limited training is not a fair or beneficial option. Proper training will give proper results.

Below, is our Fact Sheet that we handed out at our Rally:

Blind People's Rally for Change and Choice Fact Sheet

Publicly funded, intensive training centres for blind Canadians will enable blind people to be self-supporting and to contribute to the economy. Blind Canadians need to have the choice of where this rehabilitation comes from in order to be successful.

Background:1

- Blind adults in Canada have limited or no opportunity to learn Braille, cane travel and other essential blindness skills.
- Only two out of every 10 blind Canadians of working age are employed.
- The average yearly income of blind people in Canada is $12,000, far below the poverty line.
- Only 10% of blind children are taught Braille in public school.
- There are no blindness immersion programs in Canada.
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted by our country in 2009, but blind Canadians have been excluded from the right to publicly funded and accountable rehabilitation.

[1] Source: Canadian Federation of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind

Solution:

- Blind people who receive immersion training in blindness skills, and positive mentoring from blind role models, are more likely to be self-supporting.
- Skills and mentoring training for blind adults takes only six to nine months in a blindness immersion setting.
- 80% of employed blind people are literate in Braille.
- The United States has three blindness immersion centers operated by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) that accept international students.

Graeme McCreath and Elizabeth Lalonde at the steps of the Legislature in Victoria, BC.

Resources:

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml

Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)
http://www.cfb.ca

National Federation of the Blind (NFB)
http://www.nfb.org/

BLIND Inc - blindness training center in Minneapolis, Minnesota
http://www.blindinc.org/

Colorado Center for the Blind - blindness training center in Littleton, Colorado
http://www.cocenter.org/

Louisiana Center for the Blind - blindness training center in Ruston, Louisiana
http://www.lcb-ruston.com/

A Blind Woman's Letter To Government Requesting Intensive Blindness Skills Rehabilitation Training

Editor's Note: The long-standing problem facing many blind Canadians is that there is no intensive blindness skills training in Canada. The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) has long advocated the need for immersion-style intensive blindness skills rehabilitation training for blind people who want it, presently only available at three world-renown centres in the U.S.

After years of letters and meetings and budget consultations and a rally by blind British Columbians at the B.C. Legislature, no funding has yet been made available for this essential training.

Below is one blind woman's letter (name omitted for confidentiality) written to the B.C. Government, which remains unanswered. In this letter you will read of her need for training, and why intensive blindness skills training is requested and so beneficial to the blind.

February 27, 2013

Dear Hon. XXXXXXX, Minister of Health

I heard you speak on CFAX radio with Al Ferraby regarding funding for people who need out-of-country care when it is not available in Canada. My case is similar.

My name is XXXXXXX. I am a 35-year-old woman, who was born blind due to the malformation of my optic nerves. I am determined to improve my quality of life by attending the Colorado Center for the Blind, a world-leading rehabilitation training centre, in Littleton, Colorado. Attending this centre can turn my blindness from an impairing disability to a mere nuisance, allowing me to lead a fulfilling, productive, happy and an all-round healthier life.

This intensive rehabilitation training lasts 9 months and costs $40,000, which includes room and board. Thus far, I have raised $13,000, leaving me with $27,000 to raise. Your assistance in helping me receive this rehab training would truly make a world of difference to me. There is no equivalent centre in Canada.

At present, I am working closely with the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) which is working to let government know that intensive rehab training is not available in Canada and that I am in need to attend this centre.

In many ways, I am a very typical blind Canadian who does not have access to intensive blindness skills rehab training. Throughout my childhood years, I received little independent travel and daily living skills training. As a blind adult, I have found independence training opportunities to be very limited in Canada. In the past, I have worked with the local branch of the CNIB in an attempt to gain the skills I need to live independently, but discovered that lessons were infrequent, occurring once every one to two months, severely limiting my learning and practice of new skills. I was fortunate to receive what little training I did, as our branch lacked any staff offering independent living skills training for a number of years. I was encouraged to participate in CNIB's intensive one-week independent travel and living skills pilot program, but my application was rejected because I did not meet the demographic of newly-blinded Canadians. I have done a significant amount of post-secondary education, but have still to secure my degree.

Two years ago, I learned of the Colorado Center for the Blind. It offers a practical, immersive 9-month rehabilitation training program, encompassing a plethora of subjects that are taught in a real-world environment, from structured-discovery mobility with the long white cane, to how to gain a positive mindset about one's blindness, as well as to be given the chance to work towards one's personal potential.

Its innovative 9-month independent travel course would teach me not only how to travel to my destinations independently, but also how to safely explore my surroundings and how to formulate my own routes to new destinations, including problem-solving skills, reducing my reliance on orientation and mobility instruction whenever I need to learn a new route.

The centre's pre-employment program would offer me mentoring and advice on reaching my employment goal of becoming a software developer. The program would offer alternative techniques to overcome barriers to employment, job shadowing in my area of interest, resume, cover letter and interview preparation, how to network with others in my field, and much more.

Its daily living skills course will give me the skills, confidence and flexibility I need to take advantage of good employment opportunities, even in a different city, instead of limiting my job search to my local area.

Most importantly, the Colorado Center's goal is to redefine the meaning of blindness from a crippling disability to a mere nuisance that can be managed using alternative techniques and positive ways of thinking. This philosophy of blindness permeates every aspect of training, giving students the confidence and ability to shatter preconceptions and traditional barriers to equality, fulfillment and happiness, not only in employment, but also in life. It gives blind people the freedom to dream and explore possibilities that have traditionally thought to be out of our reach.

Graduates of the Colorado Center have an 80% employment rate, in stark contrast to high unemployment and poverty that affects most blind Canadians. Sadly, the kind of training Colorado Center offers is not available closer to home. Location-wise to my home, Colorado Center is the closest of the three U.S. centres which offer intensive blindness rehab training.

If I were to attend the Colorado Centre for the Blind, I would gladly pass on the skills I learn to other blind Canadians in hope of breaking the circle of dependence and poverty. I would pursue a career in software development and mentor others interested in such a career.

More information about the Colorado Center for the Blind may be found at www.coloradocenterfortheblind.org. They may be reached by phone at 1-800-401-4632.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you. I really need and hope to receive funding for this rehab training. If you would like to speak with me, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

X

Rehabilitation Re-Affirmation Resolution 2013-2

CFB, June 8, 2013

WHEREAS quality rehabilitation is essential if blind people are to achieve their potential for independence and self support, and

WHEREAS Canadians with physical disabilities currently receive publicly funded rehabilitation services as part of the medical system, but blind individuals are generally sent to the CNIB, a private agency which relies heavily on charitable contributions for its funding, and

WHEREAS the best rehabilitation for blind people has as its foundation the philosophy of blindness espoused and practiced by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), and

WHEREAS the most outstanding current examples of good, long term rehabilitation training anywhere in North America are the Louisiana Center for the Blind, the Colorado Center for the Blind, and Blind Incorporated in Minnesota, and

WHEREAS no program of comparable scope and quality exists anywhere in Canada,

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) assembled this 8th day of June, 2013, in Victoria, British Columbia, that this organization re-affirm its stand that publicly funded quality blindness skills rehabilitation ought to be available to blind Canadians as a matter of right, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Canadian Federation of the Blind re-affirms its

“Official Position Statement of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) Concerning Rehabilitation of Blind Canadians”, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Canadian Federation of the Blind, on every level, encourage the development of rehabilitation centres operated according to Federation philosophy and dedicated to partnership with the organized blind movement, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon the provinces and the federal government to fully fund comprehensive rehabilitation of the blind and affirm the right of each blind person to choose the rehabilitation program that best suits his or her needs, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that until quality centres operated according to Federation philosophy are available in Canada, we call upon funding agencies to sponsor the attendance of blind Canadians at the Colorado Center for the Blind, the Louisiana Center for the Blind, and BLIND Inc.

The Official Position Statement
of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)
Concerning the Rehabilitation of Blind Canadians

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is working to improve training and opportunities for blind people; to erase the negative stigma often attributed to blindness; and to improve the employment opportunities, economic status and quality of life of blind Canadians.

(Note: The term “blind” in this document refers to all individuals who meet the legal definition of blindness.)

1. Blind Canadians have the right to the opportunity to learn the skills and attitudes of blindness necessary to succeed economically and socially. Because the opportunity to learn these skills is a right, it must be provided at government expense. Just as the right to a free and public education exists for all Canadian children, the right to rehabilitation must be provided to blind adults.

2. Blind Canadians are not a homogeneous group. Therefore, it is appropriate that a variety of rehabilitation options be available to meet varying needs.

3. Individuals seeking rehabilitation have the right to informed consent when choosing the type of services that best fit their needs.

4. Funding for rehabilitation should follow the individual, not the program.

5. An Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plan, specifying the type of training to be provided, the responsibilities of the entity providing the training, the government

funding it, and the rehabilitation student, and the expected outcomes, must be drawn up and agreed to jointly by the government, the blind individual and the service provider.

6. Evaluation of contracts for rehabilitation will be based on the outcomes for the students, not merely on the contractor's provision of services.

7. Students may not be geographically limited in their choice of training options; those choosing training out of province or in another country will continue to receive medical coverage and other public benefits while participating in the training course.

Ironing Things Out

By Mary Ellen Gabias

Presented at the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) Louis Braille: From Literacy to Liberty Convention 2009; and printed in the Braille Monitor, the magazine of (U.S.) National Federation of the Blind (NFB), January 2009. A thought-provoking discourse on the problems we attribute to blindness that aren't because of blindness.

“I’m really embarrassed to admit it,” Joan said, “but I can’t wrap packages. I know other blind people do it, but I guess I’m not that competent. I even went to the bargain store and bought six rolls of paper for two dollars so I could practice. Every time I try to wrap a box, the paper rips.”

“Your problem isn’t incompetence as a blind person,” I laughed. “Your problem is that you’re cheap! You have to be really good at wrapping to get away with using that flimsy paper. If you’re unsure of yourself, try practicing with a small box and paper towels. Then, when you’re sure of how it’s done, buy really good paper. It’s easier to handle, and it doesn’t rip.”

I felt sad for Joan. It was so easy for her to misattribute her difficulties to blindness. How many blind people secretly feel inadequate if they have difficulty in doing something when the problem has nothing to do with lack of eyesight? Once again, I was grateful that participation in the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) had kept me out of that trap.

I began reading the *Braille Monitor* in 1971 partly because of the stories of blind people accomplishing things I’d never even considered trying. I remember how thrilled I was to hear of blind students from Scandinavia teaching blind Americans how to scuba dive. I was so intrigued that I took a scuba class for my physical education requirement in college. What a disaster! I contracted a serious middle ear infection which left me almost too dizzy to walk and forced me to withdraw from the class. The doctor warned me that I risked permanent hearing loss if I kept diving. Oh well, I thought, it’s great that blind people can scuba dive, but that doesn’t mean that every blind person has to do it.

I also remember articles in the *Monitor* about water skiing. My parents (who almost always encouraged me to try new and challenging things) forbade me to water ski.

They believed sight was absolutely necessary. My husband Paul (who is also blind) is an excellent water skier. His family encouraged him, and water skiing became his favourite hobby. He continues to try to teach me, but I haven't got the hang of it yet. Perhaps, if I'd started as a young person, I'd be a capable water skier now. Perhaps I wouldn't. Nevertheless, I enjoy the challenge of trying to learn and the simple fun of being on the water with my family. Knowing blind people do water ski liberates and challenges me to rethink limitations I've always accepted. This is true even if I can't personally skim across the water behind a speed boat.

Every person has unique talents. Blindness doesn't change that, but it does affect how we feel about our particular strengths and weaknesses. It's easy to spend so much time worrying about things we're not good at doing that we don't truly enjoy the things we do well. It's also easy to cop out and fail to work on improving skills by saying, "That's just not my thing." When we develop friendships within the Federation, we get help sorting out the difference between copping out and merely accepting our own personal set of traits.

The Federation taught me to expect more of myself, but it also taught me that I had reason for genuine pride. Federation friends helped me gather accurate information about how my performance stacked up against that of others, both blind and sighted. It was liberating to know that my best really was good enough. It was also exciting to realize that my best could keep getting better with the support, encouragement, and practical guidance of people who believed in me.

The accomplishments of other blind people challenged my limiting beliefs. Most of the time that felt great. Occasionally it was embarrassing to realize that I'd failed to learn things most adults take for granted because of what I had assumed blindness imposed on me. Like my friend Joan, I got in the habit of calling Federationists and asking for help. I knew I wouldn't be judged; I'd be given suggestions I could use to help solve my problems.

I remember calling three Federation friends for tips on frying eggs over easy. I couldn't stomach them myself, but they were Paul's favourite breakfast. As a new bride I wanted to pamper him. I got three different sets of instructions and finally developed a method which was a combination of all three.

I started doing my laundry in college; at least I did when I couldn't go home and wheedle Mom into doing it for me. I came of age during the seventies, a time when polyester and freeing women from domestic chores were the rage. Women cheerfully chucked their irons. In fact, anyone who regularly used one was secretly looked upon with pity as uptight and old fashioned. I inherited my grandmother's old iron, which I promptly stored in the back of my linen closet after I accidentally set its temperature too high and scorched a pair of slacks with it.

Even in the eighties, when fashions changed and fabrics thankfully improved, I chose clothes that required dry cleaning. It was easy to send my ironing to the cleaners along with my suits. My old iron remained buried in the closet; I pulled it out only in dire emergencies. No one had ever done more than show me how to keep from injuring myself while using it. No matter how hard I worked at it, my efforts to produce wrinkle-free garments failed miserably.

When we married, Paul contributed his own modern, gadget-laden iron to the clutter at the bottom of our closet. Marriage introduced me to new domestic dilemmas, white cotton shirts being among the most frustrating. They went to the cleaners with Paul's suits. Our cleaning bills soared, as my confidence in my own competence dipped. Other blind people routinely pressed clothes. Why was I so incompetent? Was this like scuba diving or water skiing, something that just didn't suit my personal set of skills? Or was I somehow letting myself and other blind people down by not working hard enough to get it right? I pushed my doubts to the back of my mind. After all, I had a young baby and more than enough to do. Why add hours of ironing to my already crowded days?

When our second child was born, the midwife ordered me to rest for at least a week. A close friend came over to give me a hand. Not knowing of my practice of sending Paul's shirts to the cleaners, she laundered them and dragged the ironing board out of hiding. She watched as I dug out the old iron. Then I went back to bed and left her to it. I knew she was very particular and would do as well as or better than the cleaner.

"I hope you don't mind," she said as she hung up the finished shirts in our closet, "but I switched irons. The one you gave me wasn't working properly." My trusty iron, the one that had been with me since Grandma died and had moved with me to four states and two Canadian provinces, the only one I had ever used in my life, not working?

"That's too bad," I told my friend, "I guess nothing lasts forever. Maybe you'd better explain all the gadgets on Paul's iron and show me how it works, not that I'll use it much anyway. Still, I should probably know how."

I laid one of Paul's shirts on the ironing board and prepared to be embarrassed. She was a good friend; still, I hated to show her how inept I really was. We went painstakingly through all the controls and figured out how to mark the temperature. Then I braced myself for the usual frustration of feeling small wrinkles turn into seemingly permanent creases. But it didn't happen. The new iron glided smoothly over the cloth, and the wrinkles vanished.

In the sixteen years since that discovery, I've ironed countless shirts. My time per shirt has decreased from a painstaking twenty minutes to an efficient five. I kept the old iron for several years as a back up, just in case. I hauled it out when our good iron malfunctioned and I needed to press a shirt before I had time to buy a new iron. It didn't work any better than it had before I became skilled at pressing shirts. I thought of Joan as I finally consigned that old clunker to the trash heap. She wasn't the only one who had mistakenly blamed blindness for what was really an equipment problem. Both of us had learned something about ironing things out.

Beautiful Accessibility on Victoria's Breakwater

By Doris Belusic

From the editor: The Ogden Point breakwater is a city attraction along the waterfront in Victoria, B.C. For almost 100 years, locals and tourists have strolled its 760-metre long, 9-metre wide concrete walkway. The breakwater protects the harbour from wind and waves where freighters and cruise ships dock.

It was built in 1914-17, with over one-million tons of rock, over 10,000 large granite blocks, 53 concrete caissons and over one-million cubic yards of dredged fill. As of April 2013, this previously non-railed structure is now railed.

There are times when you come across something so beautifully accessible that it just makes you feel good and smile. This is the case when I now walk along Victoria's Ogden Point breakwater.

Being a Victoria-born resident, I have frequented the breakwater walkway all of my life. I used to fish off its side with my father when I was young.

It has always been a place people like to go. It always makes for a nice outing, to walk its length to the end where the lighthouse stands, and then all the way back again. The exercise, fresh ocean-scented air and the scenic beauty is enticing.

But, it used to be gated with bars at its entrance, so only pedestrians could access the walkway. And, it was considered dangerous by some, being a narrow cement walkway out into the ocean, without any protection from falling off its sides. People always walked on it with a certain amount of caution.

Just recently, railings were installed along its sides. There was some controversy beforehand. Many people thought it was a great idea and some said to leave it as it has always been. Luckily, the railings were decided on, and what a beautiful difference it has made.

I haven't been on the breakwater walkway for some years since I have become blind. It felt too dangerous a risk.

I first went for a walk on it this past May. Literally, I had an ear-to-ear smile, and it seemed that everyone we passed did too.

I felt free. Free to walk with my white cane. My friend's mother, who is 92, also felt free with her walking cane. And, another friend, with balance issues, spoke of the same freedom. This walkway is accessible to literally everyone now. Wheelchairs, walkers, baby strollers – all can enjoy it equally.

But, it’s not just about its great accessibility. It’s also about beautification of the area. Improving the aesthetics of the walkway, obviously, was an important aspect in the choice of the railing design. The railings are a perfect choice for the seascape.

The gated entrance is gone. The railings consist of heavy aluminum top and bottom rails which span from stanchion to stanchion. In between these rails is a horizontal, heavy stainless steel cabling system. The beauty of this cable design is that it does not block the view of the ocean. You see right through, between these cables. And, the stanchions are slightly bowed outward in shape, so they make the walkway appear wider and give a nautical feel.

Thelma Fayle Sr. (left) and Doris Belusic (right) on Victoria’s breakwater.
Photo Credit: Thelma Fayle

And, being first-nations land, I’m told if you look over the edge, down on the inner side, you will see first nations artwork painted on the wall.

With the addition of the new railings, the breakwater’s charm has been enhanced. And, it’s nice to know it can now be thoroughly enjoyed by everyone.

iPhones For The Blind

By Don Jones, Victoria Imperial Lions Club, and Elizabeth Lalonde

Reprinted with permission of ‘The Border Crossing’ May/June 2013.

When Karl-Erik Sonvisen ripped open the box that contained his new iPhone, sponsored by the West Shore Lions Club, his excitement was palpable. He had been learning about all of the amazing things that the new iPhone can do for a blind person and couldn't wait to get started.

Using a voice recognition feature called Siri, the iPhone accepts spoken commands to schedule meetings, make phone calls, dictate emails and search the web. A built-in screen reader called VoiceOver can be used to hear whatever is displayed on the screen. Combined, these features make the new iPhone one of the most powerful devices ever developed for the blind. There are also hundreds of apps available for blind users; most are free. These include apps for travel with precise GPS information; text to speech conversion that can capture a printed page and speak it aloud; apps that identify objects, currency, colour; and apps that provide easy access to social media such as Facebook.

The iPhone is rapidly replacing larger, specialized devices for the blind that collectively cost thousands. However, it is still beyond the means of many blind people.

Elizabeth Lalonde receives her new iPhone 5.

Photo credit: Don Jones

This is where the Lions and Lioness of 19 I-2 enter the picture. They have partnered with the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) to provide iPhones for the blind. For $783, CFB delivers an unlocked iPhone 5 and provides training and support. This program, the brainchild of Zone Chairperson Georgia Medwedrich, was adopted last November 2012.

To date, the Victoria Imperial, West Shore, Sooke Harbourside, Sooke Lions, Sooke Lioness, Victoria Chinatown Lions, Victoria Chinatown Lioness, Esquimalt, Saanich and Burnaby Host Lions clubs have all sponsored iPhones.

iPhone recipient Elizabeth Lalonde says, "I am amazed and relishing the ease of being able to ask Siri to set the alarm, give me directions, check the calendar, provide the definition of a word, find a phone number or address, take down notes and reminders."

For more information about the Lions iPhone Project for the Blind, contact Don Jones of the Victoria Imperial Lions Club: djones@uvic.ca

Lion’s iPhone Project for the Blind

Recognizing the iPhone as a very powerful information access tool for the blind, the District 19 Zone I-2 Lions, represented by 12 clubs situated on Southern Vancouver Island, launched a project in November 2012 to equip blind people in the area with their very own unlocked iPhone5, valued at $783 each. Since then, twelve iPhones have been purchased and delivered by the project. Ten of these are within the Greater Victoria area, one in Nanaimo and one in Burnaby.

In partnership with the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), the iPhone project goals are to: boost individuals’ employment prospects, enhance individuals’ independence, increase community participation, integration, and generally improve one’s quality of life.

The project has been most successful in the Greater Victoria area where the Lions iPhone Committee is situated. When an application is received from someone outside of the area, the committee attempts to contact a club in the area where the applicant lives to encourage sponsorship of the requested iPhone.

All interested blind Canadians may apply in writing by submitting a brief request letter, by email to:
The Lions iPhone Committee

Email: djones@uvic.ca
Please make the subject text: “Lion’s iPhone Project”
In the body of the message, provide your street address, phone number and a statement about how the iPhone would specifically benefit you in relation to the above project goals. Particular reference should be made to how the iPhone’s unique features, Siri and VoiceOver, would be employed. (People who would primarily rely on their vision to use a smart phone will not be considered for the project.)

The applicants will be prioritized by the Lion/Lioness Committee and wait-listed for the devices, as new units become available. Individuals receiving the iPhones are responsible for purchasing the apps they require and for their own on-going monthly data and cell phone plan expenses.

Members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) will provide the iPhone recipients with beginner’s device orientation, information on useful blindness-specific iPhone apps, and on-going mentoring support via CFB’s TeamTalk audio server.

The iPhone recipients’ names and circumstances will be shared with the sponsoring Lions Clubs to enable project outcome evaluation.

Did you know:
This mainstream device is being used by the blind to participate on social media, such as Twitter and Facebook; to identify the color of clothing; browse web pages; listen to audio books and YouTube; send and receive email; identify products and objects; convert printed text into spoken information; explore city maps; obtain real-time GPS information while travelling; identify Canadian and US bank notes; confirm whether household lights are on or off; do audio recordings of classroom notes or favourite recipes; make and receive phone calls; not to mention Siri, which is available to answer all kinds of inquiries; plus much, much more in specific disciplines and hobby pursuits.

Building Technology Solutions for Ourselves

By Gail Copp

Editor's note: Gail Copp attended the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) convention in Orlando, Florida in July 2013. This annual convention, among many other things, offers workshops and meetings for special interest groups within the NFB during the conference. One of these meetings was for the Research & Development (R&D) Committee, which is dedicated to research and development in the field of access technology for the blind, with an emphasis on software and hardware development.

I walked into the NFB Research & Development Committee meeting at the NFB 2013 Convention, not knowing what to expect. I had attended other computer and

Gail Copp

technology seminars during this year's and a past NFB convention, where the audience was filled with advanced computer users who are blind. The topics in those meetings focused on existing technology and their level of accessibility. As a blind computer user, I'm aware of the existing shortcomings of popular technology products, but because I'm a software engineer, I find myself more interested in finding the solution.

This meeting was different. The audience was filled with engineers, like me, who work together to solve technology problems faced by blind consumers. One of the speakers during the meeting was Dr. Joshua A. Miele of the Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute. His enthusiasm about his current projects was contagious. The projects he demonstrated were YouDescribe and the Descriptive VideoExchange, which seeks to solve the problem of inaccessible YouTube videos. He demonstrated the problem with accessing YouTube by playing the audio of a popular YouTube video. Since we couldn't see the video, none of us could determine what the content was. Dr. Miele explained that YouDescribe will add audio descriptions to popular YouTube videos, so blind users can access the entertainment available across the site.

Dr. Miele answered the flurry of questions from the audience. Our interest surrounded his announcement of an API, a publicly accessible interface, that software developers could use to make their own client to deliver all of the descriptive video content collected by YouDescribe. I was enthused at the thought of contributing to an app that other blind consumers and I could use to access YouTube videos.

I've been an engineer for several years but hadn't had the opportunity to meet other blind people in the technology field. It was a treat to hear Dr. Miele describe his innovative approach to solving a technology barrier for the blind community. For me, attending the NFB convention brings home the message that blind people can solve some of the technology barriers we face for ourselves.

This innovation by a blind engineer reminded me of the origin of a popular text-to-speech software program, NonVisual Desktop Access (NVDA). Software developers, James Teh and Michael Curran, who are both partially sighted, created this software to resolve a barrier -- the financial barrier blind students face in making a standard PC accessible. Many text-to-speech programs can cost up to $1000. NVDA is free for the user to download, but does depend on donations to continue the project.

When I came home, I was curious to know if Miele, Teh and Curran were unique or if there are others who are blind and taking a leadership role in designing accessible technology. After some research, I found out about T.V. Raman, a lead engineer at Google, who is also blind. Raman is currently working on accessibility for Android phones. The blind community has been outspoken about the need to enable accessibility on Android phones, so blind consumers may have the choice between the currently accessible iPhone and the large variety of Android phones available to sighted users. Raman creates accessible apps for Android phones, like WalkieTalkie, Talking Compass and Dialer.

The R&D Committee meeting went overtime due to animated discussions among those present about the presentations in the packed 90-minute session. I walked away from the meeting excited about the imaginative solutions blind engineers are implementing and the possibility that I too can now join this active community.

‘The Power of Belonging’: An Excerpt

By Dr. Marc Maurer, with commentary by Dr. Paul Gabias

Some of the Canadians at this year’s NFB convention banquet. From left to right are: Shane Wegner, Donna Hudon, Mary Ellen Gabias, Paul Gabias, Gail Copp and Nancy Gill.

Excerpt reprinted from www.nfb.org

Editor’s Note: The excerpt below, is taken from National Federation of the Blind (NFB) President Dr. Marc Maurer’s banquet address, ‘The Power of Belonging’ which he delivered at the National NFB Convention, July 6, 2013 in Orlando, Florida. This annual convention held in the United States, of up to 3,000 blind attendees from around the world, is one of the largest and most important learning environments for blind people.

“… A persistent rumour exists that blind people are fundamentally different from sighted people, less capable than sighted people, and affected by blindness in ways beyond just the inability to see. This assertion of incapacity is bolstered by some blind people who want to use the characteristics of blindness that they perceive in themselves to shock, amuse, or excuse bizarre behaviour.

On May 18, 2012, ‘This American Life’, a program distributed by Public Radio International, featured a presentation by Ryan Knighton, a blind author living in Canada. Knighton declared that the experience of being blind places a blind person in “a completely different physical reality.” In an extensive segment, lasting more than fourteen minutes, Knighton described his experiences - among them being in unfamiliar hotel rooms.

Here is some of what was said. Note the use of slightly salacious language to attempt to make the description humorous:

And so I walk into the room and I find the bed. And then to the left of the bed, I feel along and I find this nightstand, which is where I expect the phone to be. And so I feel up the nightstand and there's no phone. Fine.

So I reach across the bed to the other side and find the other nightstand. And I feel that one up, and there's no phone. . . .

And so I turn to where I think there might be a table, and poof! There's a coffee table. So I grope this coffee table for a while and there's no phone on it. . . .

So I'm left to my last blind guy resort, which is I go back to the beginning. Back to the bed and I find the wall. And I start Marcel Marceau'ing the walls. I'm wiping them up and down.

And I round the fourth corner and I get to the bathroom, and I go past the bathroom and there's nothing. And I feel behind me again and the bed is back behind me again. So I've circled this room . . . .

So I circle the room two more times this way, wiping it down. And I check the coffee table again. I check the desk again. And I just figure, forget it. I'll just go to bed and try again tomorrow. . . .

[I interrupt Knighton's description to tell you that the report indicates that the next morning, Knighton is awakened by the sound of a ringing telephone.]

And the phone [Knighton continues] is on a coffee table. Now I know I felt that thing up to an illicit degree. I mauled that coffee table, and there was nothing on that table last night.

And so I answer the phone and it's my wife. And she says, why didn't you call me last night? And I said, well there was no phone. But there is now. . . .

And so we talk. And then I hang up the phone and I go to get back into bed, and there's now a wall there. . . .

And I'm totally disoriented at this point. Like it's funny and it's also sort of terrifying. Because I know the bed was there, and now there's a wall.

And I keep touching the wall, thinking maybe this time it'll go away. And I go to the left, and there's another wall now. And I'm a grown man and I'm lost in a hotel room. . . .

This is part of the description of the experience of a blind man carried on 'This American Life', and I wonder is this an accurate portrayal of the American life that you experience? Do your beds turn into walls? Do you keep touching the walls hoping they'll go away?

An occasional disorientation in a strange location is part of life. Most people (maybe all people) have experienced disorientation. Even Mark Twain wrote about it - being disoriented in a hotel room - in his book, 'A Tramp Abroad'. However, Knighton's description is nothing short of bizarre, and he attributes it to his blindness. ‘This American Life’ put the description on the air. Knighton, of course, may have whatever opinions suit his convenience, but for a major media outlet to portray his opinions as reality, when they are based in something quite different, is the height of irresponsibility.

Why is this man’s story worth reporting? Why do millions need to know that a blind man in a hotel room could not find the phone? Why is this depiction of incapacity worth wasting one minute of anybody’s time? Do the officials who put this program together want to make fun of the blind? Is making fun of blind people good journalism? Can respect for blind Americans exist when bigotry is permitted to masquerade as journalism?

However, Knighton and his so-called friends who work for the media are not the only ones who portray the blind. We have a very personal interest in publicity about us, and we will tell the story as it truly is. We are a part of this society, and we expect to be welcomed within it, not made the butt of somebody else’s so-called humour.

Very few blind journalists work for Public Radio International. Maybe we should demand that we get an equal opportunity to write the stories, host the programs, and report the reality as we know it to be. Blind people do face problems, and they should be reported. Have the officials at ‘This American Life’ taken note of the books we cannot read because they’re presented in an inaccessible format? Have they noticed the two-class system that guarantees minimum wage for some yet leaves us out? Have they any idea that many of the problems faced by the blind are part of a classical struggle for equal rights and equal opportunity? We deserve respect, but we also deserve more than that - we deserve equal time. Public Radio International must stop its practice of excluding us. We must be welcomed as part of the journalism community. We are not there yet, but we are coming. We own our freedom; we have power; and we know what to do with it. Our society belongs to us; we will not be shut out; we belong! …”

To read Dr. Maurer’s full banquet address, ‘The Power of Belonging’, please visit: https://nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/convent/banquet2013.htm

Commentary by Dr. Paul Gabias:

That many blind people in Canada lack proper training in effective blindness skills and positive attitudes of blindness is evident in these broadcasted remarks of Ryan Knighton’s experience of blindness.

Most of the blind people that I know do not share Knighton’s experience of blindness. The 2,500 blind people attending the 2013 National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), don’t share Knighton’s experience either, judging by their reaction during the speech.

But how many Ryan Knightons do exist in Canada? Probably many that we don't know about, given the lack of any systematic blindness skills training, thanks to governments' reliance on the CNIB for services to blind people. When we say that some of us would wish that the CNIB would simply disappear, this is why. When we say that they don't really do anything for blind people, and, in fact, do them harm, this is why.

One thing that Ryan Knighton said in his interview on the program is significant. He said that blindness was not his real problem, but his real problem was embarrassment about being blind. I think that he has a point there!

I know from my own experience as a blind person, that his problem about not being able to find things in his hotel room could have been solved fairly easily. Knowing of his own problem with finding things, Knighton could have asked the person showing him to his room to help him locate significant things in his hotel room, such as the telephone. But, of course, if he did that, he'd have less to write about, which is how he makes his living.

When I go to a hotel room, there are five things that I want to know about and I always ask about them:

- I want to know about the direction in which I should insert my card key in the lock, using a piece of tape as a marker.
-I want to know about the location and the operation of the TV remote.
-I want to know the location of the thermostat and how to operate it.
-I want to know which, among the myriad of bottles in the bathroom, is the shampoo.
-I also want to know about all the buttons on the telephone. Most importantly, on the phone, I want to know the location of the button for creating and accessing voicemail.

Knighton's problem with phoning people could easily have been solved, of course, by owning a cell phone and using it.

As with most problematic situations, if you plan for them, they are no longer problems. But for Knighton, as I said, if blindness were no longer a problem for him, perhaps he'd have nothing else to write about.

So, what about the embarrassment that we can sometimes feel because we do things differently? The embarrassment that we sometimes feel because we have to ask about basic things that sighted people don't have to ask about?

As an example, after exploring, I asked one of my sons about the location of the toilet flusher on a train. It really was in a location that I had not encountered before. Was I embarrassed? No! And if my sons hadn't been there, I simply would have asked somebody else. And, parenthetically, I always check for the locations of these things before I start doing anything in the bathroom: the towels, the trash bin, the toilet paper, and the means to flush the toilet. These procedures are so routine for me that I don't even think of them, I simply implement them.

On the Amtrak trains, all of these things are now labelled in Braille. Nice idea, as far as it goes, but I say to myself: "once I locate the item, I don't need Braille to tell me what it is!" Until the amount of Braille on the train is proportional to the number of blind people working on the train, I won't really be impressed.

I am convinced that our unemployment problem is partially due to our own embarrassment about being blind, consistent with Knighton. But, as Knighton demonstrates, embarrassment about blindness only leads to paralysis, inefficiency, a failure to plan, and feelings of helplessness and disorientation.

I suggest that, just as we blind people need to quickly explore hotel rooms and quickly resolve questions and implement strategies so that we can operate basic hotel functions, like the room key, the TV remote, the thermostat, the phone and the shampoo, we, as blind people, need to individually explore strategies and possibilities for employment at different job sites. Just like hotel rooms require only minimal interventions to make them functional for us, I believe that the same is true for blind people at most job sites.

Knighton's problems with hotel rooms are all in his head. I believe that this is also true for most job sites for blind people. These are not objective, insurmountable problems, they are often problems created in people's heads.

In this connection, I met a few people with guide dogs on the train. They were travelling from Orlando to Baltimore, which takes about a day. How did they get these dogs to relieve themselves? Where did they feed these dogs? Obviously, these dogs were taken out and were fed. The problems were solved. In the 1930's, when Morris Frank first travelled on trains with his guide dog, Buddy, he was forced to ride in the luggage compartment with his dog. And in the 1930's, where was the problem with the guide dog riding on the train with the other passengers? That's right! All in people's heads. Today, there is simply no issue about that.

I know that the YW/YMCA, Wendy's, McDonalds, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Dairy Queen, Tim Horton's, Costco, Wal-Mart, Sears, The Bay, Amtrak, Greyhound, the airlines, the banks and even the universities are always looking for people at entry level positions. Yet, I rarely hear of blind people applying for these positions. We should ask ourselves why? If we don't apply, we simply won't ever get the positions. The B.C. government does allow for an extra $800 a month of income, before claw backs from disability payments, but I rarely hear of blind people taking advantage of this. Why?

Could it be embarrassment about being blind and having to show employers how we could do these jobs? Sometimes, of course, we don't know ourselves, how we would do these jobs until we try. What's wrong with, as individuals, taking the time to explore these possibilities with potential employers?

My own feeling is that it comes down to belief in ourselves. It comes down to really believing that, with proper training and opportunity, we can compete on terms of equality with the sighted, in all arenas of endeavour.

At first, of course, this is simply a matter of faith, for us. But, doesn't everything worth doing first start with faith? This is our gift to each other in the NFB and the CFB. That faith in self advocacy and collective action, as blind people, gets boosted at local chapter meetings, State conventions, and National conventions of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and at meetings and conventions of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB).

Dr. Marc Maurer, President, National Federation of the Blind (NFB). Photo courtesy: NFB website www.nfb.org

Dr. Marc Maurer, President
National Federation of the Blind (NFB)
- Biography -

Reprinted from www.nfb.org

Editor's Note: With the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) so closely aligned with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the U.S., and the fact that our members also have membership in the NFB, it is a pleasure to pay tribute to Dr. Marc Maurer, President of the NFB. Dr. Maurer has devoted the past 27 years to the presidency of this large and most influential organization of the blind.

Dr. Maurer has been very supportive of CFB over the years for which we are truly grateful. In 2007, Dr. Maurer and his wife, Patricia, honoured us with their presence at CFB's 'Moving Forward' convention, held in Victoria, B.C. Dr Maurer has also kindly provided CFB with NFB representatives for our other CFB conventions. And, in 2009, Dr. Maurer made it possible for one of CFB's leaders to attend the NFB world-renowned 9-month intensive blindness skills training program at Louisiana Center for the Blind.

Dr Maurer, thank you for your dedication, leadership, support and for truly making a difference in blind people's lives.

Dr. Marc Maurer was born in 1951. His blindness was caused by overexposure to oxygen after his premature birth, but he and his parents were determined that this should not prevent him from living a full and normal life. He began his education at the Iowa Braille and Sight-Saving School, where he became an avid Braille reader. Maurer went on to enroll as a student at the Orientation and Adjustment Center of the Iowa Commission for the Blind. In 1969 he attended his first convention of the National

Federation of the Blind (NFB).
Maurer graduated cum laude from the University of Notre Dame in 1974. Maurer was elected president of the Student Division of the National Federation of the Blind in 1971 and re-elected in 1973 and 1975. He then enrolled at the University of Indiana, School of Law, where he received his Doctor of Jurisprudence in 1977. In 1978 Maurer moved to Washington, D.C., to become an attorney with the Rates and Routes Division in the Office of the General Counsel of the Civil Aeronautics Board. He soon advanced to dealing with international matters and then to doing research and writing opinions on constitutional issues and board action.

In 1981 he went into private practice in Baltimore, Maryland, where he specialized in civil litigation and property matters. Increasingly, he concentrated on representing blind individuals and groups in the courts. Today he is one of the most experienced and knowledgeable attorneys in the country regarding the laws, precedents, and administrative rulings concerning civil rights and discrimination against the blind. He is a member of the Bar in Indiana, Ohio, Iowa, and Maryland, and a member of the Bar of the Supreme Court of the United States.

In Kansas City in 1986 Maurer was elected as President of the NFB. He has served in this role ever since. From 1997 to 2000 he also served as president of the North America/Caribbean Region of the World Blind Union (WBU), and he chaired the WBU Committee on the Restoration of the Louis Braille Birthplace in Coupvray, France.

As President of the National Federation of the Blind, Maurer is leading the organization boldly into a new test of its resolve, beginning with the visionary expansion of the National Center for the Blind - the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute, a $20 million, 170,000 square foot research and training facility adjacent to the existing national headquarters building. The Institute is the first of its kind, conceived and built by the blind for the blind. It provides innovative education, technologies, products, and services that support independence for the world's blind. Maurer’s unswerving determination to succeed and his absolute conviction that the organized blind are the best-equipped people to solve the problems facing them has set the tone and is guiding the organization into this exciting new period of growth and accomplishment.

Maurer has received countless honours, including the Maryland Black Caucus's Leadership Award in 1985, the United States Presidential Medal for Leadership in 1990, the 1990 Heritage Award from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, the Baltimore Business Journal's 1999 Innovation Award for Excellence in Workplace Technology, the 2002 VME Robert Dole Award, and the Daily Record's 2002 Innovator of the Year award. He joined President George W. Bush in the Oval Office in July of 2001 to celebrate the success of the NFB Everest Expedition and once again when President Bush signed into law the Help America Vote Act of 2002.

An important companion in Maurer's activities and a leader in her own right is his wife, Patricia. The Maurers were married in 1973. They have two children - David Patrick, born March 10, 1984, and Dianna Marie, born July 12, 1987.

Human Rights on Flights
Taking it to the Skies

By Elizabeth Lalonde

On March 27, 2013, new policy took effect at WestJet regarding the stowage of long, white canes during flights. This positive change in policy at WestJet represents a victory for the independence and freedom of blind people in Canada.

Last summer, 2012, I travelled with my two young sons on WestJet from Victoria, B.C. to Calgary, Alberta, and back. Though I value the good humour with which WestJet generally treats its customers, I was disappointed and angered at the airline’s refusal to let me keep my long, white cane with me during my flights.

These were not isolated incidents. Other blind Canadians have experienced the same issue on other flights over the years with this airline.

On both flights, I stowed my non-folding, rigid white cane, which is lightweight and narrow, alongside the fuselage by the window. Even though my cane was stowed neatly on both flights, without obstruction, the flight attendants insisted and forced me to stow my cane in the overhead compartment above my head.

On the flight home, not only did the attendant make me take my cane from its carefully stowed place by the window, she also made a sarcastic comment in front of my sons and other passengers, saying my cane looked like a “fishing pole”.

Normally, I am not offended by these sort of comments, but as a capable blind adult, I did not appreciate being dealt with in such a disrespectful way.

I could not understand why a blind person’s cane had to be stowed in the overhead compartment on WestJet when it fit so neatly along the fuselage, where I could easily access it - especially considering other airlines allowed it.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and other Canadian airlines have policies that permit white canes to be stowed “under any series of connected passenger seats in the same row, if the cane does not protrude into an aisle and; between a non-emergency exit window seat and the fuselage, if the cane is flat on the floor; or beneath any two non-emergency exit window seats.”

Frustrated and fed-up with the treatment I received, I registered my complaint with WestJet and then, ultimately, with the Canadian Transportation Agency.

At first, WestJet was not willing to make any changes to its policy. But, after some discussion and mediation with the Canadian Transportation Agency, WestJet agreed to update its flight attendant manual to reflect the following policy, which applies now to the placement of canes:

“May be stowed lengthwise along the fuselage sidewall, in an available overhead compartment, or in the seat pocket (provided the cane is collapsible)."

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) commends the Canadian Transportation Agency and WestJet for arriving at a settlement for this positive and important change to WestJet’s policy. Blind Canadians will now be able to travel with more independence, respect and comfort.

Jane Eyre Questions Fund Raisers

By Thelma Fayle

Coincidently, four of the five members of our book club are blind. That might explain why our long chat over pizza and beer kept moving back and forth between our focus on the fictional Jane Eyre and the cnib (Canadian National Institute for the Blind).

In 1847, when Jane Eyre was published, most blind people lived in squalor often begging to survive. It was still 33 years before Helen Keller was born and would begin to exert her profound influence on the world. And Louis Braille’s famous code for the blind was still in its infancy of use.

You would think almost a hundred years of fundraising on the part of one of the oldest charitable organizations in the country, would have served to change reality for working-age blind Canadians. The truth is, it hasn’t changed a whole lot for the blind; although you would think otherwise given the mere mention of the cnib that elicits a predictably trained response from most sighted Canadians.

The quintessential ‘anything-but-blindness’ fear among the general sighted public remains pandemic. Most blind people are still perceived as being charity-takers; and even worse to many blind people is the label, ‘charity-deservers’. This pity-perception is a grave problem in the blind community.

According to my book club members, blind people have been oppressed and diminished by the prevailing, condescendingly sympathetic attitudes about blindness.

We wondered what has shaped most sighted peoples’ fear of blindness that causes them to shiver and shake in their boots, at the very thought of being blind? We wondered if it was time to shed the lifetime-sum of heart-wrenching advertorial images that have trained Canadians to this conditioned response?

Could the cnib have played a role in creating such perceptions in Canada in these last almost hundred years?

We could understand how making blind people appear incapable would seem to fly in the face of a mandate of caring for blind people; but creating a fearful and pitiful perception does seem to generate dollars. We wondered if some questioning might be healthy.

But, according to my book club members, if you even dare to question the cnib, you will quickly recognize their untouchable-sacred-cow status. They tell me the cnib goes unchallenged by donors, legislators and sighted Canadians in general. It is hard to imagine any other medical issue so fully directed by a charity agency!

At the start of the famous Charlotte Bronte tale, Jane Eyre makes a forceful, honest speech to Mrs. Reed, her guardian and somewhat cruel aunt. As a reader, you can't help but stand behind the sense of justice in the brave girl's words in the same way you would stand behind the words of Nelson Mandela. Truth is truth.

Based on the personal experiences of three particularly riled members of our book club, we decided to playfully imagine how the fiery-spirited Jane Eyre might have addressed the current cnib board of directors.

The lively book club conversation went something like this:

CNIB Board Chair: Ms. Eyre, what insights can you bring to us from the 19th century?

Jane Eyre: To begin Sir, I am surprised. Why are there so few blind people on your Board?

But to focus on the point Sir, my message is rather simple. The blind should be treated with some modicum of equality with the sighted population.

Board Chair: Don't you think we are aiming for exactly that?

Jane Eyre: Last year, according to your own website, you spent a substantial portion of millions of dollars received on fundraising and image-building, rather than on direct services helping the blind. This is an inappropriate use of donated money, Sir.

Board Chair: Ms. Eyre, perhaps your lack of respect for this esteemed board is inappropriate.

Jane Eyre: Your reputation is stellar mostly in the sighted community Sir, and I believe your sanctimonious fund raisers are not working in the best interests of blind people. I scorn the fact that you are not providing blind people with the blindness skills they need to participate in the world as equals.

I think you get the drift of our book club conversation.

Many blind people feel that working-age blind Canadians who most need the perpetually abundant donated dollars for skills training are not getting them.

Jane Eyre may have been shunted off to the lonely isolation of an orphan boarding school, but at least she had the opportunity to learn useful skills that led to an ability to create a better life for herself. This brave conversation sent her on her way:

Schoolmaster to young Jane: Are you not grateful to your aunt and benefactress for your keep in this fine home?

Jane (about her neglectful aunt): If that is a ‘benefactress’ Sir, a benefactress is a disagreeable thing.

Our book club members decided that in this century, in Canada, blind people need dare question the "benefactress", the way Jane did.

Blindness Simulations

By Doris Belusic

Note: I was spurred to write about this topic after hearing a reporter on the radio talk about her blindfold experience as she was guided for a 2 ½ hour tour through the streets of Vancouver, B.C., as part of a performing arts festival in January 2013.

The thought of becoming blind is terrifying to most sighted people. Blindness is a foreign concept.

Sighted people who are curious about understanding blindness have often tried to use simulations as a way of attempting to experience and understand first-hand what it might be like to be blind.

But, what do people really learn from blindness simulations?

“Sighted people who simulate blindness for a few hours, or even a few days, come away from the experience understanding what it's like to be a sighted person put at a terrible disadvantage,” explains Mary Ellen Gabias, president of CFB. “They learn very little about how blind people gain ease and confidence using alternative techniques.”

“In a psychology class, my instructor thought that by blindfolding sighted students for an hour, they would get to know what it was like to live and function without sight,” says Erin Lacharity, CFB member. “If anything, this exercise only reinforced the misconception that blind people are helpless, unemployable and lost in the world. By the end of class, more people felt sorry for me and none of my classmates had learned about the coping mechanisms and skills I employ everyday.”

Since 2006, at least three restaurants in major cities in Canada have offered patrons an experience of dining in the dark. Their advertising goes something like this:

“Without the sense of sight, the senses of touch, taste, hearing and smell are intensified, allowing a new perception of reality.” Or: “Dining in the dark replicates the experience of how the blind eat, heightening tastes, aromas and textures. Or: “Should you need to get up during the meal, you place your trust in the servers, who guide you through the busy, pitch-black restaurant — offering a snapshot of what it would be like to be blind.”

A new perception of reality? Replicate the experience of how the blind eat? Does any of this really offer a true snapshot of what it’s like to be blind?

The use of a blindfold in the guise of 'creating awareness' often has the effect of reinforcing the deepest emotional fears and worst negative stereotypes about blindness,” says Gabias.

It seems there is a large amount of ignorance at play here. If we replace the blindness theme, with a different condition, say, paraplegia, where diners could wheel about in wheelchairs, would 'valuable lessons' be learned by such a superficial exercise?

Obviously not.

So, if blindness is not what the out-of-date simulation exercises would have us believe, then what is the world really like without vision?

“Blind people do not inhabit another planet,” says Gabias. “Obviously, we get our information about the world without the use of sight or with the use of very limited sight. Still, our world is not a different world.”

Blind people span the full spectrum of society, with individual strengths, weaknesses, challenges, histories and potentials – like everyone else. Some are born blind, some become blind later in life, some are fully blind, and some have residual vision.

Perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions may serve the function of charity-fundraising, but does not serve the blind well. In fact, it does a great disservice to the blind, as many have been working hard in their daily lives to dispel these erroneous beliefs.

The best way to learn what it's like to be blind is to have repeated interaction with blind people. When there is informed knowledge about blindness and of the abilities, challenges, and accomplishments of blind people, and knowledge about the full lives many blind people can and do lead, then there can be a better understanding of what it must be like to be blind.

When a blind person has learned to function independently and confidently – *over time* – then living with blindness becomes normal, natural – although, at times, it can be a challenging nuisance.

Many factors come into play for a blind person to have a positive attitude and feel OK about being blind. For those who do, many can and do compete on terms of equality with sighted peers, study, hold jobs and professions, raise families, use technology, read, enjoy hobbies, cook, travel and just plain live their lives - like anyone else.

Even though many blind people live full and successful lives, most sighted people still think of blindness in terms of society's age-old stereotypes and misconceptions - helplessness, incapacity, disorientation, unemployability, difference, and pity.

Sighted people need to learn to see blindness in a different light. It is a tall order when unhelpful simulations still abound.

The Problem of Simulated Blindness

By Mary Ellen Gabias

From the editor: This wonderful article was written by Mary Ellen in 1996 when she was editor of an earlier Canadian Federation blindness magazine. It explains the issue around blindness simulations very well and is as relevant today as it was back then.

As we struggle to convince the average member of the public of the real capabilities of people who are blind, we are often told, "I can't imagine what your world is like." The world is simply the world. Blind people do not inhabit another planet. Obviously, we get our information about the world without the use of sight or with the use of very limited sight. Still, our world is not a different world. Curiosity about what blindness must really be like is almost universal. One sighted toddler I know was found walking down the hallway of her home with her eyes closed, swinging a mop from side to side to simulate the movement of a long white cane. When someone asked her what she was doing, she said she was playing at being her blind aunt. My own children are reaching the age where the blindness of their parents is no longer taken for granted. It has become a matter for questioning. "Mommy, how do you know I'm in the refrigerator when I'm not supposed to be?”

One would think that the musings of immature children would be different from the thoughtful curiosity of mature adults. Surprisingly, it often is not. Many seemingly intelligent people have told me that they have gained new understanding of my life after a late evening power outage. They seem to feel that their disorientation while searching for a candle and matches in a darkened house is similar to my daily life. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. I also find power outages disorienting and annoying. No one likes to have their regular routine disrupted by circumstances beyond their control. But my daily life as a blind person is not disorienting and frustrating. My lack of eyesight sometimes imposes problems. It often encourages the development of creative problem solving skills. It does not keep me from leading a full and active life.

All of this leaves us with the problem of devising a way to satisfy the legitimate curiosity of our sighted neighbours. Everyone committed to good public education about blindness wants to take the mystery away and replace it with constructive thought and genuine understanding.

So why not use blindfolds to teach people "what it's really like?" After all, we function without sight. Isn't blindfolding the sighted nothing more than creating a level playing field?

The answer depends on the context in which blindfolding is used. Progressive rehabilitation programs for the blind use blindfolds for students with some remaining vision in order to teach them the skills of blindness. Often these students are afraid of the consequences of losing more vision. They wonder if their life will become more limited every time their visual acuity drops or their field of vision narrows. By simulating total blindness in a controlled training environment, these students can face and conquer their worst fears. Instead of clinging desperately to every shred of remaining vision, they learn to develop alternative, non-visual methods for leading their lives. When the blindfold comes off after approximately nine months of training, the remaining vision is actually of much more use to them. Instead of using it in desperation as a primary, but insufficient, means of functioning, they use it as a backup to supplement the effective alternative techniques they have learned.

What about blindfolding sighted rehabilitation workers? Again, the use of blindfolding as part of a long-term training program for sighted staff members can be extremely beneficial. As blindfolded sighted people learn the skills of blindness and gain confidence in those skills, they become genuine advocates for the capabilities of blind people. They can tell their future clients with certainty "I know these techniques work because I've used them myself." For both blind rehabilitation students and sighted staff members, the key to the successful use of blindfolding is its use in combination with solid training and candid discussions about the attitudes surrounding blindness. Both of these things take time - at least three months in the case of staff members and longer for blind students.

This brings us to the question of simulation exercises. Many organizations, believing they are acting in the interests of raising awareness, run programs in which participants simulate blindness and other disabilities for an hour or a day. Participants are not given rigorous instruction in the alternative techniques of blindness. They may be guided by a sighted person with some knowledge of blindness skills. But the purpose is not to 'rehabilitate'. It is to 'raise awareness' about 'the problems faced by blind people'. Negative attitudes and misconceptions about blindness are deeply ingrained in our society. Good will is present in abundance, but it is usually coupled with misinformation. It takes a long time to provide accurate information about blindness. 'The fear of the dark' is so much a part of most people's lives that it requires emotional courage to face and overcome. It takes longer than an hour or a day to work through the process. Unfortunately, the use of a blindfold in the guise of 'creating awareness' often has the effect of reinforcing the deepest emotional fears and worst negative stereotypes about blindness.

Playing in the Dark, Not Like Being Blind

By Mary Ellen Gabias

Reprinted with permission of The Daily Courier, Kelowna, June 2, 2013.

From the editor: Mary Ellen wrote this excellent letter in response to CNIB's Dining in the Dark fundraiser, which was held in her city of Kelowna, B.C.

The entrepreneurs responsible for Dining in The Dark are selling their expensive experience as a unique and fun way for customers to appreciate food more deeply.

I don't understand why eating dinner with the lights out has any bearing on the taste of the food or the liveliness of the table conversation.

Nevertheless, if people think they're having gustatorial enrichment, more power to them.

If they think putting themselves in a circumstance where they function with less confidence and competence than normal teaches them something about blindness, they're mistaken.

That mistaken notion has negative consequences for those of us who are blind and are doing all we can to demonstrate that blindness is a less common, but nevertheless normal, way to live fully.

My problems as a blind person have very little to do with the fact that I can't see.

They have a great deal to do with people around me who frequently have very low expectations concerning my capacity to do everyday things like crossing streets, climbing stairs, carrying trays in food courts and a hundred other things.

People have a hard time understanding how I function because they are terrified when they imagine themselves suddenly unable to see. I understand sighted people are curious and genuinely want a way to understand my life.

The single worst way to understand blindness is to simulate it. Sighted people who simulate blindness for a few hours, or even a few days, come away from the experience understanding what it's like to be a sighted person put at a terrible disadvantage.

They learn very little about how blind people gain ease and confidence using alternative techniques.

To learn the true nature of blindness would require much more time and intensive skills education and discussions.

Thinking that an evening dining in the dark gives you a window on blindness is akin to believing a day spent playing cowboys and Indians creates understanding of aboriginal culture. In both cases, the experience may be fun, but using that experience to draw conclusions about a minority community is bogus.

If you want to attend Dining in The Dark because it's a novel experience, go for it. Please remember, though, you're a sighted person in the dark who is learning exactly nothing about being blind.

CNIB is using this event to raise money, thereby reinforcing stereotypes blind people are working hard to eradicate.

How shameful that CNIB is helping its finances by undermining its clients' aspirations.

A Letter Re: ‘Playing in the Dark, Not Like Being Blind’

By Patrick Wolfe

From the editor: This letter to the editor was sent to The Daily Courier, Kelowna, B.C. in response to Mary Ellen Gabias’ letter, ‘Playing in the Dark, Not Like Being Blind’. Reprinted with permission.

I have just read Mary Ellen Gabias’ brilliant letter “Playing in the Dark, Not Like Being Blind” (The Daily Courier, June 2, 2013). In my view it should be reprinted in newspapers across the country.

I have no doubt that the Dining in the Dark organization and the CNIB are well-intentioned, but I have to question the value of initiatives that, as Ms. Gabias says in her penetrating and insightful critique, reinforce “stereotypes blind people are working hard to eradicate.”

Two years ago I read “The Politics of Blindness: From Charity to Parity” by Graeme McCreath, who is blind and no fan of the CNIB. In it I learned that a 2005 joint federal government/CNIB study “concluded that 75% or more [of blind Canadians] remained permanently out of the job market.”

McCreath stresses the importance of blind Canadians learning Braille at a young age, thereby increasing their literacy and employability and providing, in the words of the Rt. Hon. David Blunkett, former British Home Secretary and Minister of Education and Employment, “the best pathway out of welfare and dependence.”

But, despite the fact that the CNIB’s charter calls for the promotion of Braille, its “performance record has been abysmal,” according to McCreath.

Canada does not have a facility like the Louisiana Center for the Blind, which “provides comprehensive training in life-skills, mobility, Braille and a variety of essential activities that enable blind people to reach higher skill levels,” he writes.

Both McCreath and Gabias are passionate and articulate advocates for their cause. Hopefully the CNIB, Dining in the Dark, and others will learn from them, with the result that those who are blind can, as Gabias puts it, “live fully in the world.”

Repeated Interaction is the Best Way to Understand Disabled

by Larry P. Johnson

Reprinted with permission of the San Antonio Express-News, April 29, 2013

From the editor: This well-written article comes all the way from San Antonio, Texas. The author perfectly explains the problems with disability simulations. He also tells us how best to learn about disabilities and the disabled.

Let's pretend that you are blind, deaf or confined to a wheelchair for 30 minutes, or an hour, or even for a whole day.

How would it make you feel? What would you learn about being disabled? Well, it's limiting. It's frustrating. It's scary. It's certainly not something you want to have to live with for the rest of your life. Right?

Every year, scores of college campuses, private employers and government offices, even some elected public officials, participate in what are called "Disability Simulation Days," in which non-disabled faculty members, students, employees and city councilmen try to experience disability by putting on blindfolds, plugging up their ears or riding around in wheelchairs. Does it work?

By doing it, are they more aware of the talents, abilities, resources and skills of people with disabilities? Are they more aware of the social discrimination, chronic high unemployment and general feelings of exclusion experienced by persons with disabilities because they have participated in a one-hour disability simulation exercise?

Several years ago, I was in a bicycle accident which resulted in my breaking my hip and collarbone. During part of my rehabilitation, I had to use a wheelchair to get around. Being blind and trying to navigate my way around the rehab center in a wheelchair was extremely challenging. This was no simulation. It was the real thing.

In my view, disability simulation exercises teach the wrong things. They emphasize the barriers, the obstacles, the limitations that confront people with disabilities. Note the phrase "confined to a wheelchair." It sounds as though the person using a wheelchair is a prisoner. Yet, in reality, the wheelchair actually provides him or her the freedom to get around.

My white cane allows me to travel independently. Cochlear implants and hearing aids help a person who is hearing-impaired to better understand what is being said to them.

If you should lose your ability to see, or hear or walk, you can learn alternative ways to read, to communicate or to travel. You can work, go to school, get married, have a family. The real pain in having a disability is society's attitude of exclusion and discrimination.

Disability simulation exercises tend to perpetuate the myths of incompetence and dependence among persons with disabilities. A better way to build understanding and acceptance of persons with disabilities is through daily repeated interactions, serious conversation and a genuine awareness of the fact that, as human beings, disabled or non-disabled, we are more alike than we are different.

And that's how I see it.

The True Courage of Blindness is the Courage to Educate

By Elizabeth Lalonde

Banquet speech presented by past president, Elizabeth Lalonde, at CFB's 'Louis Braille: From Literacy to Liberty' 2009 convention, held in Victoria, B.C.

"We believe that with the appropriate training, attitude and opportunities, blind people can (and do) achieve their dreams, not the diminished dreams of low expectations, but the dreams that come from knowledge, skills, self-confidence and self-respect. We believe that it is never too late to learn new techniques and new ways of thought. We believe each of us has a spark of creativity within us which can be ignited when we come together to teach, to learn and to dream."

A few weeks ago, I flew to visit my friend in Calgary. I couldn't wait - a few days away from my husband and children - away from the stress of selling our house and buying a new one.

I checked in my suitcase, and it was just me and my handbag and my cane. Free. No children pulling at my sleeve asking for sippy cups of milk, telling me they have to go pee. No husband nagging me to clean the house or feed the cats. No, really, I love my family. Anyway, I was free, doing my own thing, and loving every minute of it.

I stopped by the counter to ask directions to the gate. The person said to go straight and then left. I smiled and continued on my way. Then suddenly, the pitter patter of footsteps, a hand at my side awakened me from my blissful aloneness. "Ms, can I take you somewhere? Can I show you where to go?”

My heart sunk. I turned to the attendant, and said, “Thank you, but I'm fine,” and tried to continue on my way. But she grabbed my arm and said she would take me to the elevator. “No,” I said, “I am going to the escalator.” “Oh, but you can't do stairs can you?” I felt like screaming at her, that yes I can do stairs. My legs work well. I have no trouble moving. My eyes have absolutely nothing to do with my feet, but I refrained. It wouldn't do any good to get mad. She would be hurt and wouldn't learn anything from this encounter. Graciously, I thanked her again and said I was going to the escalator and would be fine. Reluctantly, she let me go.

I located the escalator, rode to the top and found my way to the gate. I had always pre-boarded with the elderly and small children, but this time I wanted to board with the rest of the crowd. I got in line with the others.

Soon a woman said, "They just called for pre-boarding, shall I take you to the front?" "No thank you. I don't need to be pre-boarded." I walked up the platform and onto the plane on my own. What an empowering feeling. I breathed deeply. I made it. Or had I?

I handed the attendant my boarding pass. A silence followed. Then he said, "You can't sit in this seat. This is an exit seat. You have to be able bodied to sit in this seat."

I couldn't believe it. This man was saying I was not capable of opening a door in an emergency. I open doors everyday of my life with no problem. But they were disqualifying me from this task, not based on my abilities, or my competence, but based on my blindness.

I could have made a stand. Many have. But I gave in and followed the attendant to the back of the plane, where I sat for the duration of the flight. I placed my long cane along the fuselage beside me, sighed and prepared to relax.

But, it wasn't over yet. The attendant said, "You can't put your cane there. It will have to go in the overhead bin."

My heart beat fast. I didn't get to sit in the emergency seat. But, I wasn't going to let them take my cane away. I smiled and said I needed my cane with me at all times. He made a noise as if to argue, but then stopped as if thinking better of it.

No wonder so many of us want to hide away, not bother. The courage needed to be a successful blind person has nothing to do with what most people think. It doesn't have to do with lack of sight, or with the challenges and occasional inconveniences caused by our lack of sight. The courage comes from the effort, patience and perseverance needed to educate the sighted public about our capabilities.

Sometimes I want to tell people to leave me alone, to let me get on with my day, with my life. But, instead, I smile and shrug it off and remember it is their lack of understanding and not my lack of sight that causes the problem.

I cannot let their misconceptions about blindness disable me. I cannot let their misunderstanding create barriers that do not exist; I cannot let their prejudice stop me from carrying on, from achieving my goals, from living my life to its potential.

No person, or agency, or group of people, or society has the right to prevent another person or group of people from living their lives with dignity, with opportunity, with liberty.

The theme of this year's convention is about liberty. "From Braille Literacy to Liberty." Louis Braille, the inventor of Braille, exemplifies the kind of courage I am talking about.

Louis Braille demonstrated courage. He demonstrated courage during a time of oppression for the blind. Louis Braille, blind from an accident in his father's workshop, lived at a school for the blind in France.

At the time, blind students were reading books embossed with tactile letters. This was an arduous and time-consuming method of reading.

A military captain, Charles Barbier, developed a tactile code for soldiers to read under shelter of darkness. Louis Braille adapted this "night writing" and made the six-dot Braille code we know today.

The new Braille code proved much more efficient than the raised-letter method, and blind students at the school read with efficiency and ease. It wasn't long until sighted administrators banned this code and banned the blind students from reading it. But Louis Braille didn't stop using the code he had developed.

Finally, after Braille's death, the code became an accepted and valuable form of literacy for the blind throughout the world. Thank goodness Louis Braille had the courage to fight for his rights and for the rights of blind people to read.

Literacy is a basic human right. If Louis Braille hadn't fought for Braille literacy, blind people wouldn't have literacy today. That is why in his name and in the name of all blind people, we must continue fighting for Braille literacy.

It is unacceptable that only 10 per cent of blind people are taught to read Braille. It is unacceptable that people presume to say that Braille is outmoded, gone with the way of the dinosaurs. What would sighted people say if we took away print and said it was obsolete? It is unfathomable. This is the fight we must continue.

The public thinks blind people are courageous because of the difficulties of not having sight. Of course, not having sight can be challenging sometimes. But, the true courage of blindness is when you step out and meet prejudice head-on, as Louis Braille did. Declaring our dignity, our right to live on equal terms with our sighted counterparts.

Now, I will read an excerpt from an essay of mine called "Blind Pride, My Journey":

"I'm ten years old, standing with the orientation and mobility instructor, getting my first white cane. I didn't want a cane. None of the other kids had a cane. I didn't want to be different. The instructor said I should take it home and at least use it for crossing streets.

The cane folded into four parts and fit into my bag where it stayed most of the time. Whenever I came to an intersection, I would pull it out, walk quickly to the other side of the road and stuff it back into my bag. The cane was a symbol of my difference. I didn't think so then, but I was ashamed.

I was shy and quiet and didn't want to be conspicuous. I'd never met any other kids my age who used a white cane, so why should I? I didn't know then how empowering and liberating it could be to use a white cane, how it could turn traveling into an adventure and make me feel proud."

I carried my cane in my school bag because I didn't want anyone to know I was blind. They might laugh, or snicker, exclude me from games or parties, call me names or in some way, by words, tone of voice or action, treat me differently.

Exclusion, name-calling, treating someone differently from other people; this is prejudice. This prejudice stems from lack of understanding, lack of proper and accurate information; it can spread and warp into societal and legislative rulings that cement the prejudice and make it more and more difficult for the group of people to climb their way out.

Sometimes prejudice can be so entrenched that the people discriminated against don't realize the discrimination exists. Laws that consider my blindness instead of my competence; rules that arbitrarily prevent me from sitting in an exit seat in an airplane simply because I am blind; rules that give a free ticket to someone traveling with me simply because I am blind, even when I can travel on my own. A charity, CNIB, that advertises the pitiful and stereotypical image of a blind person, in order to fundraise; a charity, CNIB, that speaks on behalf of blind Canadians as if we have no voice; a system that allows and reinforces an unemployment rate among the blind of over 80 per cent; a system that threatens to take children away from their parents simply because the parents are blind. These examples represent a deep-rooted, systematic discrimination. Many blind people resist accepting their blindness because they don't want the stigma that comes with it.

Following is a quote from Erik Weihenmayer, the first blind person to climb Mt. Everest:

"When I was thirteen, I became blind from a rare disease, retinoscheses. There were a few months of frustration when I wasn't really sure what I'd be able to do, but something interesting happened.

I didn't really want to accept blindness and accept myself as a blind person. I didn't want to be identified as a blind person, but I found something interesting: when I actually accepted blindness - I didn't try to transcend it or go beyond it or beat it, but just accepted it - that was the greatest thing I could ever have done.

I went off to a rehabilitation center where I learned how to use computers, a center like the Colorado Center, the Minnesota Center, or the Louisiana Center, and learned how to use a cane and learned Braille. I found that, when I was able to read a poem in Braille in front of my class or was able to walk down a hallway with a cane with my buddies, those things that I thought would separate me, actually connected me back to the world.

I started thinking, if I thought I couldn't read, but I can and if I thought I couldn't be mobile, but I can, maybe there are other things that I can do that I didn't think I could do, if I just approached it differently, if I thought about the idea that we can get to the top; we just have to do it a different way."

Like Erik Weihenmayer, we as blind people must take pride in who we are, as individuals and as a group. Individually, blind people will take control of our own lives, and collectively, we will take control of how blindness services are shaped in this country.

Like the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) historical book says, "We walk alone, and march together." The two essential aspects of the blindness civil rights movement include: courage on an individual level and courage on a group level.

First, courage on an individual level: All of us have courage. All of us have drive and intelligence and creativity and potential. Some of us may have had more opportunity, more chance to succeed in a profession or job. But all of us have the spirit to achieve great things. Everyone of you must believe that.

It doesn't matter what others say. They can tell you it's impossible for a blind person to do something, but that inner spirit, that courage inside you will overcome these external limitations. Remember, the limitations come from the limitations of people who do not have an accurate understanding of blindness and the capabilities of blind people. Blind people cannot sit in the background, in their homes, in anonymity.

Here are two stories that illustrate the potential of blind people:

"The young medical student was nervous as he slid the soft, thin tube down into the patient's windpipe. It was a delicate maneuver and he knew he had to get it right. Tim Cordes leaned over the patient as his professor and a team of others closely monitored his every step.

Carefully, he positioned the tube, waiting for the special signal that oxygen was flowing. The anesthesia machine was set to emit musical tones to confirm the tube was in the trachea and carbon dioxide was present. Soon, Cordes heard the sounds. He double-checked with a stethoscope. All was okay. He had completed the intubation.

Several times over two weeks, Cordes performed this difficult task at the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics. His professor, Dr. George Arndt, marveled at his student's skills. "He was one-hundred percent," the doctor says. "He did it better than the people who could see."

Tim Cordes is blind. He has mastered much in his twenty-eight years: Jujitsu, biochemistry, water-skiing, musical composition. Any one of these accomplishments would be impressive. Together, they're dazzling. And now, there's more luster for his gold-plated resume with a new title: Doctor. Cordes has earned his M.D.

In a world where skeptics always seem to be saying, stop, this isn't something a blind person should be doing, it was one more barrier overcome. Without sight, Cordes had to learn how to identify clusters of spaghetti-thin nerves and vessels in cadavers, study X-rays, read EKGs and patient charts, examine slides showing slices of the brain, diagnose rashes, and more.

He used a variety of special tools, including raised line drawings, a computer that simultaneously reads into his earpiece whatever he types, a visual describer, a portable printer that allowed him to write notes for patient charts, and a device called an Optacon that has a small camera with vibrating pins that allow his fingers to feel images. "It was kind of whatever worked," Cordes says. "Sometimes you can psych yourself out and anticipate problems that don't materialize. You can sit there and plan for every contingency or you just go out and do things."

So that was a story about a blind doctor. Now a story about a blind mountain climber:

"On Everest it's so cold that one day my eyelids froze together. It didn't really matter, but it was sort of strange."

On May 25, 2001, nineteen members of our expedition summited Mt. Everest, breaking several records. For members of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) the most important facts were first that Erik Weihenmayer had made it to the top, demonstrating in yet another powerful way that blind people are capable of doing extraordinary things when given the chance to try, and second, but equally important, that everyone in the expedition was safe.

They were teaching us that you didn't climb with your eyes, you climb with your hands and your feet. Your hands and feet became your eyes. You could scan your hands and feet across the face, and you could find your hold and do a pull-up and reach up and scan your hands again, and it was like I was creating this road map in my brain as I reached out and found the holds. It was like connect the dots.

That led me to all sorts of different climbs. I thought I could ice climb. People said, "No, Erik, it's different from rock climbing; big giant pieces of ice will come down on top of you."

Well, I learned to climb ice by the sounds that I would hear under my tool. Not everyone believed in it like the NFB. There were critics I read in magazines. There were experts on Mt. Everest whom I had never met, but they sort of judged me on the basis of knowing one thing about me, and that was being blind.

They said, "A blind person on the mountain is way too risky; it's crazy. Above 8,000 meters he'll be a huge liability. He'll kill himself, and he will kill his team. I would never be a part of this climb."

Part of me was a little worried because I was pretty sure I had the skills. I had been climbing for years and years, and I thought, "I'm ready, but maybe they know something I don't know.

Then the other side of me said, "They are just wrong. They are judging me on the basis of one trait. They know nothing about me except the fact that I'm blind." That side of me was sort of offended. So I decided the best response was to go climb Mt. Everest."

You don't have to become a doctor like Tim Cordes or climb Mt. Everest like Erik Weihenmayer, to be courageous. Courage is about testing boundaries, stepping out of the box that people and society have built around us. Courage is about challenging the stereotypes of the dependent, inactive, immobile blind person. Courage is about allowing yourself to become independent, active and free. That's about courage on an individual level.

Now, I will talk about courage on a group level, because this is equally as important.

In Canada, government does not fund or provide blindness rehabilitation for blind adults. In Canada, government hides behind CNIB and does not take responsibility for services for blind people. Blindness rehabilitation in Canada is a matter of charity.

A similar system prevailed in much of the United States before 1943, when blind people were added to the rehabilitation act. In the United States, blind people are used to a state funded rehabilitation system. In Canada, whether a blind person gets a cane travel lesson, depends on how many people played bingo last Tuesday. Of course, the lag time between when service is cut or expanded is more than a week, but service is directly linked to bingo games, casinos, and raffles.

Ironically, Canada, which is renowned for its social programs, including a universal public healthcare system, makes blindness a private affair. The problem isn't so much the private aspect, but that there is no accountability, no outcomes-based evaluation of programs, and very little consultation with blind consumers. The charity model for blindness rehabilitation in Canada has existed for 90 years. Blind people have no choice than to get blindness-related services from this one agency.

Over the years, CNIB has depicted blind people as pitiful and helpless to fundraise. Recently, the CNIB removed the word "blind" from its name, and made public what it had been doing for years. It launched a campaign to promote "vision hope and vision health." The CNIB promotes the use of sight enhancement and reliance on remaining vision and places little emphasis on learning blindness skills. Essentially, no intensive training in blindness skills for blind adults exists in Canada.

From an Address delivered by Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, Late President, National Federation of the Blind (NFB) at the banquet of the Annual NFB Convention, Houston, Texas, July 1971, titled 'To Man the Barricades':

"Let me say something to those agencies who still look back to yesterday, who condescend to the blind, who custodialize and patronize. To them I say this: Your days are numbered. Once people have tasted freedom, they will not willingly or easily return to bondage. You have told us as blind people and you have told the community at large that we are not capable of managing our own affairs, that you are responsible for our lives and our destinies, that we as blind people must be sheltered and segregated - and that even then, we are not capable of earning our own keep. You have told us that we as blind people do not really have anything in common and that we, therefore do not need an organization - that there is no such thing as an organized blind movement. But you have not spoken the truth."

The organized blind movement Dr. Jernigan was referring to was the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). Tonight I am talking about the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB). The Canadian Federation of the Blind is sister organization to the National Federation of the Blind in the United States. What better example of courage on a group level.

The National Federation of the Blind was started by a Canadian-born man, Dr. Jacobus Ten Broek, in 1940. The movement in the U.S. started with a handful of passionate and determined people. Now the National Federation of the Blind has grown to 50,000 members.

Like its sister organization, the Canadian Federation of the Blind is a grassroots organization of blind people committed to the empowerment and equality of blind people. Our members have more than blindness in common. Our members believe in some basic ideas about blindness.

The Federation is a group of people working together to banish old, negative stereotypes of blindness and replace them with a new and productive concept. Members come together to educate the public about the abilities of blind people; members come together to change unproductive, outdated and harmful rules and laws that govern the lives of blind people; members come together to create more opportunities for the blind in Canada and in the world. This effort takes commitment; it takes cooperation; and it takes courage.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is not just building a consumer movement in this country; other important consumer movements of blind people already exist. The Canadian Federation of the Blind is building the Federation in Canada, an organization that believes in the unlimited potential of blind people; an organization that believes blind people can achieve anything, with a positive attitude, proper training and opportunity.

To quote my great friend, colleague and board member of the Canadian Federation of the Blind, Mary Ellen Gabias:

"The most remarkable thing about the Canadian Federation of the Blind is that we're tenacious about proclaiming our Federationism in a country that insists on thinking of us as wards of a charity. We'll win the battle in the outside world to the extent that we win it in our own heads and hearts. That's why connection with the Federation, its literature, and most of all its conventions, will do far more to free blind people than a huge infusion of government rehabilitation money would do. Of course, if directed properly, we certainly wouldn't turn down the money." End quote.

Our mission is vital. It is essential to continue to grow the Federation in our country, to spread the spirit of confidence, the spirit of group solidarity, the spirit of full participation in society and in life for blind people. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to our members. We owe it to blind Canadians.

It is easy to let others fight for our civil rights, let others go out and advocate and change what it means to be blind. But we all will play a role. We will work together to achieve freedom for all blind people.

Blind Canadians will no longer sit by while CNIB takes our money, deprives us of meaningful and effective rehabilitation services, steals our dignity as productive and powerful human beings and monopolizes anything to do with blindness in this country. This is not acceptable.

We will join together to change the status of the blind; to build our own rehabilitation and training centres and to get government to fund the services that are our right; we will join together to make sure blind citizens of this country receive proper living wages and benefits and compensation for the costs of blindness, without being penalized for getting ahead in life. We will join together to bring dignity and respectability to blindness and to tell the world about our capabilities and about our diverse and unlimited potential.

I will close with another excerpt from Dr. Jernigan's speech:

"We (the organized blind) are abroad in the land in growing numbers - aware of the peril and prepared to fight it. It is just that simple: We are prepared to fight, and we will fight. We don't want conflict or trouble with anyone; we don't want to quibble or be aggressive or militant; we don't want strife or dissension; but the time is absolutely at an end when we will passively tolerate second-class citizenship and custodial treatment. We are free and we intend to act like it. We are free and we intend to stay that way. We are free, and we intend to defend ourselves. Let those who truly have the best interests of the blind at heart join with us as we move into the new era of equality and integration."

Treating Blind People as Equals: A Letter Urging Parliament to Advance Accountable Public Library System

April 21, 2013

The members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) are deeply distressed at the decision of the government to undermine our Charter Rights by once again funding CNIB's efforts to dominate and control our access to library services.

When Library and Archives Canada (LAC) announced the Initiative for Equitable Library Access (IELA) in 2007, consumers and their organizations were nearly unanimous in saying that we wanted our right to a publicly funded, publicly managed, and publicly accountable library service. Another way to put it is that print-disabled Canadians wanted CNIB out of the library business. Initially, many consumers believed LAC should emulate the extremely successful U.S. Library of Congress National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. LAC made it crystal clear to everyone that library services are a provincial responsibility and that LAC would under no circumstances take on a coordinating service provision role like the Library of Congress has done. Consumers and provincial libraries were left struggling to define a model of service that would provide the technical expertise needed to adequately serve our information needs while maintaining public accountability.

LAC clearly understood that there was little support for leaving CNIB in control of library services. Therefore, LAC proposed to create a new NGO to act as a national hub to carry on CNIB's traditional library functions. Provincial libraries expressed concerns about governance and funding. Consumers, wary of yet another unaccountable private entity performing what should be a public function, demanded measures to ensure accountability. Despite intensive efforts on the part of LAC, the NGO hub proposal failed to gain wide support. IELA ceased operation without resolving basic issues of structure and governance.

While IELA was still actively working to fulfill its mandate, CNIB embarked on a political and public relations campaign to get its private library funded with public dollars. It dramatically increased the fees it charged provincial libraries for access to its collection through inter-library loan and deposit collections. Provinces unwilling or unable to pay were told that blind people in their jurisdictions could borrow directly from CNIB. Those with print disabilities other than blindness would no longer have access to the collection, even though that collection had been digitized with 6 million federal dollars plus many more millions from private charitable donors. Those donations and federal dollars were provided with the clear intent that books would be made available to those who needed them. It is highly unlikely that anyone contributed with the intent of providing a private corporation, even one with an iconic charitable reputation, with a resource it could manipulate in order to leverage funds from provincial and federal governments.

In 2011, the Federal government awarded $7 million to CNIB to strengthen its infrastructure and to try yet again to create a hub model acceptable to Canada's public libraries. Consumers of CNIB's library service noticed no appreciable improvements. Print-disabled people who are not blind received no service at all. A consultant spent several months in discussions with stakeholders. The result was a somewhat altered hub plan couched in general terms that still left all the outstanding issues from the earlier IELA debacle unresolved.

While CNIB was engaged in its very public political activities, provincial libraries responded to IELA's collapse by carefully building a consensus around a collaborative inter-provincial system for sharing and developing accessible materials. They chose to build through open inter-provincial discussions. They researched sources of alternate format books in addition to materials held by CNIB, determined the extent of unrestricted collections held by public libraries that met accessibility standards, and sought effective means to apportion responsibilities to avoid duplication of effort. They entered into a collaborative relationship with the Library for the Blind of Western Australia and other members of the Commonwealth …; that partnership alone resulted in the capacity to provide more than seventy thousand titles in restricted alternate formats; more than 20,000 of those titles are currently available for download. (It is worth noting here that the Library for the Blind of Western Australia offered its collection and download software to Canada without charge, while CNIB withheld its collection from Canadian libraries even though taxpayers had helped pay to digitize it.)

In November, 2012, the Provincial and Territorial Public Libraries Council (PTPLC) voted approval of the National Network for Equitable Library Services (NNELS), the name chosen for this initiative. Testing has been carried out on the open source software used to manage the downloadable content received from the Commonwealth. The system is up and functional; books can be accessed now.

The details of the NNELS initiative have been discussed very openly within the library community. Unfortunately, NNELS has not done nearly as well at publicizing itself as CNIB has done. As a result, those not intimately involved with the issue are unaware that Canada now has a choice of two very different library service models.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) believes the NNELS model offers more promise for equitable and integrated service. We believe NNELS is more politically accountable, capable of leveraging a wider variety of resources, and can build capacity for production of specialized formats beyond that which can be provided by a single source model.

- The NNELS model puts the responsibility for serving Canadians with print disabilities squarely on the desks of provincial librarians. Consumers unhappy with the level or quality of service know exactly where to take their issues.

- The hub model leaves the provinces responsible for funding and the operator of the hub (CNIB) responsible for service. Unhappy consumers who complain to their provincial librarians are likely to be told to take it up with CNIB. When consumers complain to CNIB, the response will almost certainly be “We'd be happy to do more if only the provinces would provide more money.”

- Because NNELS is committed to leveraging both restricted format and unrestricted format digital collections, print-disabled library patrons will be in a stronger position to insist that accessibility be a top priority in the acquisition of all digital library materials.

- If service to the print disabled is viewed as being outside the regular functioning of the library, something purchased from a single specialized provider, public libraries will be far less likely to incorporate universal access into their acquisition decisions.

Even if only a small fraction of the total capacity of Canada's libraries is brought to bear on issues having to do with print disability, the synergistic combination of those resources will result in a much greater capacity than would be available to any single hub.

Truly excellent alternate format service requires that the libraries providing it have knowledgeable production specialists, especially for math and music Braille. Because it will actively seek bids from a variety of potential suppliers, NNELS is positioned to seek expertise from many sources, including small businesses operated by knowledgeable blind producers. Clearly CNIB would be free to bid on any contracts for specialized production.

Building capacity throughout Canada will ultimately lead to more available materials. Relying on a single source provider such as CNIB will have the opposite effect.

The Federal role in the development of the saga of dueling library systems has been mixed at best. To its credit, the government did create the IELA process which allowed broad discussion of options and helped strengthen the understanding that people with print disabilities have the right to information. It is unfortunate that IELA and the Federal government have so far been unsuccessful in facilitating results in harmony with the expectations the process raised.

Throughout the entire IELA process and afterward, the Federal government clearly signaled to all involved that libraries are a provincial responsibility. Why, then, is that same Federal government now inserting itself in a manner calculated to undermine the efforts of the provinces to carry out that responsibility?

The Federal government must begin to conduct itself in such a way that the CNIB hub model no longer has an unfair advantage. In fact, given its insistence on provincial responsibility, the Federal government is obligated to do all that it can to support moves toward accountability on the part of the provincial libraries.

We suggest several steps the government can take to undo the damage it has done with this recent announcement. The most appropriate decision would be to rescind the budget announcement.

Failing that, we suggest the following:

1) One of the conditions for CNIB's receipt of the $3 million of promised Federal funding would be a contract requirement that CNIB provide NNELS with digital copies of its library collection. The Federal government has already paid to have the collection digitized; arguably, that collection is now a public resource. As a matter of reciprocity, NNELS should be invited to reciprocate and provide CNIB with its digital downloadable collection of alternate format materials. However, since NNELS is not being offered a Federal contract, reciprocity could not be mandated but would be a result of a spirit of collaboration.

2) As part of its contract, CNIB should be required to inform all of its library borrowers of the availability of service through the NNELS system. Text for the notification should be provided by NNELS and distributed by CNIB without alteration or comment. The distribution should be regarded as part of the contract deliverables.

3) In the interest of equity, NNELS should receive equal funding. If funding is equal, requirements for reciprocity in collection sharing and in notification of the availability of CNIB library services could be imposed equally on NNELS.

If the government made the decision to provide CNIB, and only CNIB, with funding because it was unaware of NNELS, the situation can be rectified now that government has more complete information.

Canada has the potential to build an integrated library service for the print disabled so forward thinking that it could become the model for the digital age. Or Canada could decide to retain old patterns and the restrictive and antiquated thinking they represent.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) urges Parliament to insist that innovation be recognized so that Canada once and for all can move toward a truly accountable public library system that serves blind people as the equal Canadians we are.

Very truly yours,

Mary Ellen Gabias, President
Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)

You Asked CFB

Question About Parents Teaching Blind Children

Answer:

I'm glad you wrote to the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB). I hope you've found some of the information on our website www.cfb.ca valuable, particularly the back issues of the 'Blind Canadian' magazine, especially the articles dealing with Braille and with the education of blind students.

I strongly recommend a magazine called 'Future Reflections' produced by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the United States. Though some of the items deal specifically with U.S. laws and regulations, most are general enough to apply to home schooled students and their parents. You can find back issues of the magazine at www.nfb.org. Families can also subscribe to the print edition. The National Federation of the Blind sells a number of books on the education of blind children. The on-line order form is U.S. specific, but Canadians can place orders by phoning (410) 659-9314 and follow prompts to the Materials Center.

The American Action Fund for Blind Children and Adults www.actionfund.org has a free Braille lending library of children's books that welcomes Canadian borrowers. The Action Fund also operates a book club that gives blind children copies of popular books that the children can keep.

National Braille Press (NBP) www.nbp.org sells 'Just Enough to Know Better', a primer for parents who want to learn enough Braille to help their blind children. They also have a collection of children's books in electronic Braille that can be embossed with a Braille embosser or read on an electronic Braille note taker. For very young children or for blind parents, NBP's children's Braille book of the month club offers a new book each month with print and Braille on facing pages. (I'm a blind parent of four sighted children and thoroughly enjoyed reading to my children in Braille while they followed along in print.)

Seedlings Braille Books www.seedlings.org sells Braille children's books at reasonable prices.

I hope this information helps. I'm passing your request on to colleagues who may be able to offer further assistance. Feel free to contact the Canadian Federation of the Blind again at any time.

Sincerely,

Mary Ellen Gabias, President
Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)