

The Blind Canadian

A publication of the Canadian Federation of the Blind

In this issue:

- Continuing the fight for blindness skills training
- Introducing the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind
- Canadians at the NFB of Washington State Convention



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 informing 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.

EDITOR: Doris Belusic

COVER DESIGN: Gail Copp

COVER PHOTO: Joanne Gabias

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Canadian Federation of the Blind

Mary Ellen Gabias, President

PO Box 8007

Victoria, BC V8W 3R7

Phone: (250) 598-7154 ♦ Toll Free: 1-800-619-8789

Email: editor@cfb.ca / info@cfb.ca

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Blind Woman Fights for a Chance at an Independent Life

By Edward Hill, Victoria News/Black Press, February 8, 2014

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Heidi Propp navigates through her house with ease, and finds her computer. Her Braille translator allows her to read the screen line by line, or to program code for web design, one of her favourite hobbies.

Blind from birth, the 35-year-old Colwood woman appreciates the safety of her parent's home, but is itching to find a job and a measure of independence.

But making that leap to what sighted people might take for granted – crossing the road, catching a bus, cooking, shopping – requires intensive training, the kind offered nowhere in Canada.

“With the travel skills I have, I can't use the bus, and I can't cross busy streets,” she says. “I don't have the travel skills to learn the route from my house to the bus stop to downtown.”

Propp has received some cane training from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, but certainly not enough to allow her to safely walk from Kelly Road to Sooke Road and catch a bus. For day-to-day outings, she is reliant on handyDART, an appreciated but oversubscribed service often with more clients than seats.

“I really rely on handyDART to get from place to place at this stage. If that doesn't come through, you stay at home or call a cab. That's not conducive to getting a job,” she says.

Propp and a number of advocates for the blind are lobbying the provincial government to help her attend the Colorado Center for the Blind. Students spend up to nine months honing their senses and mastering skills of everyday life. Propp has \$13,000 scholarship and needs \$27,000 to cover tuition, but she has an offer the province might find hard to refuse.

The Colorado Center will cover her costs up-front, in return for the province paying it \$900 per month that would have gone to Propp for disability assistance, once she returns and finds a job.

She's keen to work as a computer programmer, or to help train other people with visual impairments.

“So there's no up-front cost to government and we'd like the government to pay what I would have earned on income assistance, so they'd lose nothing,” she said. “If the situation continued as it is, I'd be on income assistance anyway.”



Colwood resident Heidi Propp, who is blind from birth, is trying to convince the province to help fund an intensive skills training program at the Colorado Center for the Blind. She is eager to get off social assistance and to move out of her parent's house, but there is little in the way of job and skills training for blind people in Canada.

Edward Hill/News staff

Elizabeth Lalonde knows the benefits of training for the blind. The Saanich mother of two graduated from the Louisiana Center for the Blind in 2010, where they learned self reliance skills. Like an army ranger dropped into the jungle at night, they dropped Lalonde 10 kilometres away from the centre.

“They'd drop us off and we'd find our way back on our own. Once you accomplish that, it's like wow, it feels so good to get to that point,” she said. “You live in apartments, every day it's like you're working at a job. At the centre you're learning Braille, technology, cooking. We created a big meal for 40 people. It's a lot of confidence building. If you can cook for 40, you can cook for your family.”

Lalonde launched the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind in 2011, which operates out of a scouts hall in Saanich. This winter she received a \$50,000 grant from the Ministry of Social Development and the Disability Without Poverty Network, to teach employment skills to blind adults.

“One problem is that all our participants don't have the skills to get to the centre on their own, but it is so doable. I take the bus every day with my two boys,” she said. “It's so vital to have these skills.”

She models her centre off the Colorado institution, where it teaches “structural discovery” in complete darkness – even partially sighted people wear blindfolds.

Students are taught to construct a map of their environment through the position of the sun, sounds of cars and people, and changes in the texture of the ground. Traditional training for the blind has focused on rote memorization of specific unbending routes such as between home and a job.

“The expectations of the blind in society are terribly low. We're trying to raise the bar for blind people too. (Blind people) often don't know what they are capable of,” said Lalonde, who earned a BA in journalism and anthropology from the University of Victoria. “The model we teach is different, it's about empowering blind people and giving them confidence to learn skills and to take charge of their own life.”

Propp attends the Pacific Training Centre twice per week where clients have trained in cooking and urban navigating, but the facility is still too small to advance her skill set to a place where she can hunt for a job.

“I have no apprehensions cooking. I have apprehensions of getting hit by a car. There's not a lot of sidewalks around here. Sooke Road is tricky. I'm not confident crossing that street. Once I get that training and conquer that fear, I will totally catch the bus. It's the only way to be independent.”

Propp also spends a few days per week in the gym with Graeme McCreath, a visually impaired physiotherapist in Saanich and author of *The Politics of Blindness*. He's helping Propp press her case for the government to underwrite her proposal to go to Colorado.

McCreath, 67, who last year won a human rights complaint against the TC10K race, received job training for the blind in the U.K. in the 1960s, and worked as a typist and eventually as a physiotherapist. Skills training in Canada is virtually nonexistent and unemployment among the blind is extremely high, he said.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind estimates 90 per cent of completely or mostly blind people can't find a job.

“The system isn't kind to blind people at all,” McCreath said. “The unemployment stats are terrible. The majority of blind people never work, not because they can't, but because they're not given a little extra help.”

McCreath expects that if Propp can't get skills training, she'll be on social assistance and living at her parent's house for the rest of her life.

“You can't just pay someone \$900 a month to go away. Why not give them a chance to contribute to society, and give them an expectation of a proper life.”

editor@saanichnews.com

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In Canada: The Blind Left Behind

By Dr. Paul Gabias

Editor's note: Dr. Paul Gabias and CFB President Mary Ellen Gabias met with three B.C. MLAs in their Kelowna area on November 25, 2013. Again, they discussed the need for funding for intensive blindness skills rehabilitation training for blind individuals who need and want it, specifically a Victoria woman (see previous article).

Canadian society likes to think of itself as inclusive, kind, generous, supportive and egalitarian, but nothing could be further from the truth for blind Canadians, if the BC government has its way. At present, while each provincial government has its own subsidized medical program, these programs do not include rehabilitation to blindness.

Some blind Canadians have been able to acquire limited amounts of rehabilitation, with a wide range of quality, scope and results, in addition to adaptive technology equipment and library services. This, through an ever-changing patchwork of service providers with diverse and unpredictable public and private funding sources.

In Canada, unlike in the United States, there is no systematic funding mechanism to support blind people's adjustment to blindness, should the need arise. Guide dog schools in the United States and Canada have provided some blind people with guide dogs, but it is estimated that only 2% of blind people actually use guide dogs. There is no solid basis of public funding to help blind people master the skills and attitudes to effectively learn cane travel and Braille, two necessities in a total adjustment to blindness. Also, there is no systematic source of public funding to help blind people cope with the public's persistent, uninformed and negative attitudes about blindness, being blind or going blind.

It is not only publicly-funded rehabilitation that is necessary for blind people, but it has to be the right kind of rehabilitation, for maximum results. It has to be rehabilitation that is rooted in the belief that through rehabilitation, the average blind person can learn to compete on terms of equality with the average sighted person, in all aspects of life, including the average place of employment.

For blind and sighted people alike, employment is the key to independence, of course, but representatives from the government of British Columbia told us that a business case for government funding of the rehabilitation of blind people would have to be submitted to government before government would even think of funding the rehabilitation of blind people, given our government's fiscal shortage.

It would seem that, in BC the employment of blind people is a last ditch affair, an afterthought, a back of the bus kind of operation, after everybody else has had a

chance at the economic growth of this province. It would seem to me that, under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and under BC's Equal Rights provisions, blind people, under Canadian and provincial laws, are equal to sighted people in their right to be adequately prepared for employment.

Blind Turned Away by B.C. MLAs

Letter to the editor, Kelowna Capital News

Dec 20, 2013

Blind Canadian editor's note: Graeme McCreath is a long-time CFB member, author of 'The Politics of Blindness', and recently retired from his physiotherapy practise.

To the editor:

I live in Victoria, but friends of mine in Kelowna visited three members of the provincial government recently which prompted me to write this letter.

Does a wheelchair user know what his chair is for? Obviously yes. Does an amputee know he needs a prosthesis? Obviously yes. So blind people also know what's best for them, right?

Wrong, according to the B.C. government.

Why else would the provincial Liberals insult knowledgeable blind advocates by disregarding what they suggest is needed for motivated blind people? No need to reinvent the wheel, they seem to say. But what wheel is that? The wheel of social dependency, fear of blindness, and the wheel of incapacity?

A young blind woman sits in her family home in Victoria because she was never given the tools, the attitudes and the encouragement to succeed. There she remains because our elected officials feel they have no responsibility to give her the optimum training and abilities to succeed. They don't believe in her, any more than they believe in the capacities of the blind experts. Why? With negative attitudes about blindness, how can she possibly succeed?

Just recently two very capable and successful blind citizens with years of personal and leadership experience for blind people, spoke with three Liberal government MLAs to make a modest request. A mere \$36,000 is all it would cost to send her for training to help change this blind woman's life, but these MLAs refuse to acknowledge the need for her training, even though her ability to be a productive, contributing citizen will become a much greater possibility.

Removing the burden of dependence should be a priority.

Norm Letnick, one of the MLAs in question, did not completely dismiss the request but he did the usual political manoeuvre and created a diversion. Like reinventing the wheel, he suggested yet another study to justify what these blind people and most others already know.

Although not available in Canada, there are three excellent comprehensive training centres for the blind in the United States where intensive work in positive attitude training about blindness, mobility, independent living and life skills are available to Americans, free of charge, through federal and state government subsidies. American students completing their stay of approximately six to nine months at these residential intensive learning facilities where positive attitudes about blindness are embraced, have a far better chance of living a productive and independent life. Statistical data on the outcomes of these US centres is readily available for these MLAs to quickly and easily review.

The Minister for Social Development and Social Innovation, Mr. Don McRae, is, at present, engaged in consultation with people with disabilities. The Minister appears to have a disconnect with his fellow MLAs, or do they somehow fail to view blindness as a worthy “disability”?

How genuine is the Minister if these well-informed blind advocates are disregarded and given the brush-off?

So far, the alternative provided by government for many young blind Canadians is a life like that of this young Victoria woman—to remain marooned, neglected and never having the experience to have a normal life. Instead, her prospects are grim, having to permanently exist for a lifetime on a subsistence allowance.

Varying young disabled citizens, including young blind people, need to undergo specific comprehensive training to help prepare them to function effectively. In Canada, paraplegics and others with similar conditions are given thousands of dollars in training to prepare them to live in a wheelchair. But in Canada, when you are blind, our society still considers us as incapable and worthless charity cases.

All we're asking for is to give young blind, motivated Canadians a chance to become independent, contributing and respected members of society.

Barriers for blind Canadians are social, not physical.

Surely, Minister McRea, blind citizens should be given the chance to succeed and rise from second-class citizenship to full contributing Canadians.

Let's show some leadership in giving all disabled people a chance, but especially let's change what it means to be blind in British Columbia.

Graeme McCreath, Victoria, B.C.

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More information about intensive blindness skills rehab training may be found in previous issues of the Blind Canadian magazine

(also found at www.cfb.ca under publications):

October 2013 issue:

- An Absence of Intensive Blindness Skills Training and Rehabilitation for Blind People in Canada*
- A Blind Woman's Letter to Government Requesting Intensive Blindness Skills Rehabilitation Training*
- Rehabilitation Re-Affirmation Resolution 2013-2*
- The Official Position Statement of the CFB Concerning the Rehabilitation of Blind Canadians*

April 2013 issue:

- It's Been Two Years Since Rally*
- The Link Between Proper Blindness Skills Training and Opportunity*

July 2012 issue:

- The Sorry State of Blindness Training in Canada*
- The Official CFB Position Statement Concerning the Rehabilitation of Blind Canadians*
- Rally for Change and Choice*
- My Journey at the Louisiana Center for the Blind*
- My Experiences at the Colorado Center for the Blind*

May 2008 issue:

- Being an Informed Rehabilitation Customer – Making Wise Choices*
- What is Good Rehabilitation?*
- NFB-Style Rehabilitation for the Blind*

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the U.S. has extensive information and personal testimonial stories about intensive rehabilitation. Please visit www.nfb.org to learn more.

National Federation of the Blind (NFB) Training Centres

Presently, intensive blindness skills rehabilitation training is only available at these three centres:

BLIND, Incorporated (Blindness: Learning in New Dimensions, Incorporated)

Shawn Mayo, Director
100 East 22nd Street South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404
Phone: 612-872-0100
Toll-Free: 800-597-9558
Fax: 612-872-9358
E-mail: info@blindinc.org
Web site: <http://www.blindinc.org/>

Colorado Center for the Blind

Julie Deden, Director
2233 West Shepperd Avenue
Littleton, Colorado 80120
Phone: 303-778-1130
Toll-Free: 800-401-4632
Fax: 303-778-1598
E-mail: jdeden@cocenter.org
Web site: <http://www.cocenter.org/>

Louisiana Center for the Blind

Pam Allen, Director
101 South Trenton Street
Ruston, Louisiana 71270
Phone: 318-251-2891
Toll-Free: 800-234-4166
E-mail: pallen@lcb-ruston.com
Web site: <http://www.lcb-ruston.com/>

Ode to a Philanthropic Investor

By Thelma Fayle

Editor's note: Thelma is a strong supporter of the CFB and of its mission. She is especially concerned about the lack of quality blindness skills training available to blind Canadians. This poem is her initiative to help bring needed awareness to the issue. And, yes, like the poem says, she is looking for that special philanthropic investor.

Thelma is a freelance writer in Victoria, B.C. Her latest publication is the book, "Ted Grant: Sixty Years of Legendary Photojournalism" (Heritage House), which also debuted at New York's Leica Gallery this April.

Ode to a Philanthropic Investor

I want to write a book –
I want to sit at my computer and write a book
that I wish had been written in Canada
a hundred years ago.

I want to write about five working-age blind people's experiences
as they gain skills and confidence at a training centre in the U.S.

I want to hear from the five people every week
of the nine-month long, live-in program they attend.

I want to take notes and ask them questions –
and find out what is happening to them
as they work hard to transform their own lives.

I want to track what will happen to this group of blind Canadians,
who have had to settle for less -
until now.

I want to know what this chance
to learn new skills feels like to them.
I want to know if it is scary and exciting.

I want to tell readers of my book what happens
when working-age blind Canadians get a real chance –
to learn at centres of excellence,
instead of being shunted to a charity
for a cane or talking book.

I want to help sighted people understand
that telling blind people to go to a charity
to deal with their blindness is insulting.
I want to make sighted Canadians imagine
what it is like to be told to take the serious medical issues of their children -
to a charity.

I want to try to begin to undo whatever it is
that has shaped most sighted people's fear of blindness
that causes us to shiver and shake in our boots
at the very thought of being blind.

I want readers of my well-researched book to know
that blind people today, in Canada, have been diminished
by condescendingly sympathetic attitudes about blindness.

I want to write about the resolve of the five participants
in a way that will inspire others in our community.

I want to use my digital recorder – to capture
the five participants laughing with a resounding joy
that runs deeply through their whole bodies –
when they come back to Canada and tell about the nine months
that changed their lives.

I want to describe how the five grew and gained confidence,
and looked back on how far they've come.

I want to watch their faces light up
as I take notes about their most meaningful parts.

I want to write about the exciting new jobs they search for
when they come home and chase their passions.

I want to write about how they feel
about being able to get jobs and work hard
and go out to a nice restaurant on a Saturday night –
like everybody else.

I want to interview the ones who will be inspired
to follow in the footsteps of these five mentors from B.C.

I want to dedicate my book to Ken Westlake,
an accomplished, quiet and private man
who stood up at the Canadian Federation of the Blind
convention a few years ago and spoke
joyfully and vigorously
about how the program changed his life.

I want to thank Ken for the chill
he sent up my spine.

I want to interview Elizabeth Lalonde
and find out the status of her seemingly impossible dream –
of opening an immersive training centre right here in Canada – one day,
to be run by the blind, for the blind.

I want to thank Graeme McCreath in my Acknowledgement section
for his agitated and courageous voice
in his book, *The Politics of Blindness* –
we heard you, Graeme, we heard you.

I want to wave my book in the air at a book launch –
and shout out to the spirit of Helen Keller:
“We get it, Helen, we Canadians are finally doing
what you told us to do a hundred years ago.”

But,

I need \$36,000 for tuition for each of five working-age blind Canadians
to attend world-renowned independence training centres
in the U.S. where they will receive essential blindness skills
and pre-employment skills training –
unavailable in Canada.

Is there a philanthropic investor out there with a spare \$180,000?

*(Please contact the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB):
info@cfb.ca or 250-598-7154)*

Getting the Word Out

By Mary Ellen Gabias

Marc Garneau is a former astronaut and a Member of Parliament from Westmount, Quebec. He was a candidate for the leadership of the Liberal party and now serves as a member of Justin Trudeau's shadow cabinet. He was in Kelowna on April 17, 2014 for a series of public appearances.

Paul and I attended a gathering focused on the needs of veterans. Marc Garneau quickly broadened the field of discussion. Members of the audience made comments and asked questions.

Paul took the opportunity to explain that things for blind people really haven't changed much since Colonel Baker came home from World War I. Baker's idea of a charity to provide service was a notable advancement at the time. The times have changed for others who can count on government to provide at least a basic level of service. Not so for blind Canadians. Governments at all levels in Canada are hiding behind an outmoded blindness agency that serves itself.

The audience gasped in surprise and horror. They really didn't know, but I doubt they'll forget.

Sometimes the prospect of going to meetings with politicians is daunting and depressing. It's easy to become cynical and think of them as phonies who care only about the number of votes they can get in the next election. We must never forget that such forums can put us in front of fellow citizens whom we can educate. The people in the chairs probably will not jump up and start advocating for rehabilitation of blind people, but they'll remember what we said when they're asked for contributions to CNIB and they'll likely be supportive of CFB's issues instead.

The audience clapped when Paul finished. I ended the discussion on a lighter note that I hoped would get the attention of a former astronaut. "CNIB is to blindness as Sputnik is to space travel."

I'm glad I had five copies of CFB's Blind Canadian magazine to give to Liberals in policy positions. We can be proud of our publication; it tells our stories and spreads our message well.

Our race is a marathon, not a sprint. Every time we take a run at public education we not only get closer to our goals; we invigorate ourselves for the next leg of the race.

Changing Fear into Hope

by Nancy Gill and Mary Ellen Gabias

Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) is a sneak thief! When I heard that I have the condition, about thirty years ago, I didn't realize that it would not only steal my eyesight, but my self-confidence could easily be taken from me, too. Every year my eyesight diminished. First I lost the ability to see in the dark. Then, slowly, my field of vision (what I could see out of the corner of my eyes) got narrower and narrower.

I've known for more than twenty years that I would eventually be blind, though I wasn't sure how much vision I would retain and for how long I would keep it. In addition to becoming blind, I also had a serious hearing loss. Together, this condition is known as Usher's Syndrome. It's the leading cause of deaf blindness in North America.

As a young woman in my late 20's, with a little girl I was raising on my own, I didn't want to think about blindness. How terrifying!

So I pretended nothing was happening. Yes, I checked out a few things, against my will, but at the insistence of those around me. But I kept saying to myself: "This isn't me! I want nothing to do with this!"

I had a part-time job as a cashier at a grocery store and was doing fairly well. Sixteen years ago I had a second child. Life wasn't perfect, but blindness, my greatest fear, was keeping a polite distance – at least during the daytime.

At night it was different, but I managed to get rides with friends and to create a social life that meant I never really had to go out alone after dark.

Nothing lasts forever, not even denial. Slowly my eyesight worsened. Because of my congenital hearing problem, I hadn't done very well at school. I couldn't hear the difference between some consonants, so reading was difficult. I relied a lot on my memory to make my way in school, but never had the desire or the basic skills to continue after I reached the end of grade twelve. I was lucky to have my job at the store, since I've always been friendly and conscientious. I worked hard and became the union steward for my bargaining unit.

Then the store changed its tills; suddenly I realized that I could no longer read effectively. I began wondering whether it was the tills or whether my eyesight had begun the long dreaded decline I'd been warned to expect.

My memory saved my job. I had committed most of the product codes to memory and I could still read the totals as they appeared. But work, which had always been a source of fulfillment for me, became a cause of tremendous stress!

Then one day I was watching a local news show from Victoria and heard something that began to change my understanding of myself and my blindness. Elizabeth Lalonde, then the president of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), was talking about blind people being proud of themselves and having limitless potential. She talked about the lack of services and training and the need of blind people to get together to help one another. "Wow!" I thought. "Nobody's ever talked to me about blindness in this way." So I phoned Elizabeth and began attending meetings of the CFB whenever I could.

My eyesight was changing rapidly. It got harder and harder to read the tills at work. Friends in the CFB helped me to explore possible technological answers, including talking cash registers. But I had never been a reader and I'd resisted new technology; besides, my poor hearing made it very difficult for me to understand computer voices. Finally, about a year and a half ago, I decided that I could no longer continue in my cashier's job and that I lacked the technological skills to move into another position. Reluctantly, I retired.

My CFB friends encouraged me to turn the disheartening loss of my job into an opportunity for self-improvement. They told me about the EATI program, which bought me a new hearing aid and paid for computer equipment and training. Through the CFB/ Lions' iPhone project, I received a new iPhone and CFB members showed me how to use the voice and large text programs built into the device. I still struggle with it, but I am beginning to realize that I do have the capacity to do well with technology.

Last April, I took two scary but important steps. I applied to the CFB for a scholarship to attend the convention of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) held in Orlando, Florida, the first week in July 2013. I also applied to the South Burnaby organization for

a grant to hold an information and social night for all blind people in Burnaby, British Columbia, in September 2013.

Thanks to the grant from the CFB, which was made available through the generosity of the Knights of Columbus, I was able to go to Orlando for the convention. I took my sixteen-year-old son with me, because I was terrified of travelling alone to a new place. I knew he wouldn't have that much fun leading me around, but thought that I could make it up to him by spending a day or two visiting theme parks in Orlando.

My CFB friends had other ideas. They got my son involved and committed to activities with other people his age and I was on my own to sink or swim. Well, not quite. My friends happily accompanied me to meetings if we were going the same way, but they encouraged me to take off on my own and explore. As they pointed out, I would never have a better or more supportive place to challenge myself. If I had difficulties, volunteers were available to help. My friends told me to trust in myself and stretch my skills.

I cried at first. Why couldn't they understand how scared I was? But they were both firm and enthusiastic. "We know you can do it, Nancy." I got so sick of hearing those words! Annoyed, angry, and frightened as I was, I chose to venture outside my hotel room door.

At first I didn't want to admit it, but getting out on my own wasn't nearly as terrifying as I'd been telling myself it would be. I met a lot of people. Everybody had stories to tell. A lot of very capable people had been afraid, too, but had chosen to keep moving. Listening to them, it was hard for me to believe they'd ever been as scared as me; they were so sure of themselves. If they could take care of themselves, maybe I could, too.

I attended seminars about tools to open the world of computers to me. I met with other blind parents. I went for a walk to a local restaurant with another blind person and got thoroughly soaked in a downpour! And my son, who had come to the convention to guide his blind mother, was out enjoying activities with youth his own age. Some of them were sighted children of other blind people at the convention. He began to understand that he need not spend his life taking care of me. His aspirations need not be limited by my blindness.

When I arrived in Orlando, I thought about how the initials NFB could stand for "Nancy Fears Blindness." That's still true sometimes, but I know those initials could also stand for "Nancy has Faith and Big dreams."

The South Burnaby settlement house approved my grant application. When I got home from the convention, I got busy taking the ideas, and most of all, the spirit I gained from the convention and created an event called "Burnaby Blind Connections." On September 6, 2013, more than fifty blind people, along with families and friends, gathered at the Maywood Community School. A host of volunteers and community organizations were there to help other blind people know what help is available and how to advocate for services that aren't there but should be. My experiences with CFB and the NFB convention have convinced me of how important it is to give back. If I can help just one person break through denial and face blindness with hope and optimism, then my painful journey will have been worth it because others will not have to repeat it.

Reflections

By Maria Kovacs

Today, I sit here and ponder about my past. Being sighted for forty years and then having no sight, was probably the most difficult thing I have had to endure.

As the days, months and years went by, things became much better for me. So many decisions had to be made. One of those decisions was: Do I want to sink or swim? The answer to this question was simple. I am a survivor and failure is not in my vocabulary. I was a perfectionist and quitting would have killed me. So, what was staring me in the face was to move forward and to try to do my best with the hand of cards dealt to me.

I had to learn cane mobility. To me, this was very difficult. So, what kind of decision did I need to make now?

A guide dog was a great solution for my mobility. This dog gave me the independence I could never imagine and lots of love, but the most important thing, I felt, was that my children would now have a pet. So, this amazing animal was great in all of our eyes.

So, off I went to get a guide dog in California. I got there and my fears were extremely high. A new place, and this, only two years since I went blind. How could I be so crazy to think I could do this and be successful at it?

The answer is simple. I loved my stay in California and was given a wonderful dog named Benicia. So now, I had done what I thought the impossible: I had learned cane mobility, went to get a guide dog, and came home in a plane all by myself.

So, life was now showing me that only if I didn't want to survive, only then, I wouldn't. The adjustment from sight to no sight was not by any means a picnic, but if one wants to swim, instead of sink, it's very much possible.

My life is now very different than it was, but it is full and there's never a dull moment. Who said blindness is boring? To me, it's an everyday learning experience. Each and every day that comes by is a new learning day, and eighty percent of the time is very much successful.

For those who read my story, I can say there is much more to it than I am sharing. Blindness is not in any means an easy disability to handle, but it is up to the individual to make the best of it and move forward. Putting yourself under a rock is never good for anyone. If I fall down, I dust myself, and try again. Life is much too short and should not be taken for granted.

My advice to anyone who cares to listen is this: My friends, take one day at a time and make the best of it. Blindness may be hard and almost feel like the world has fallen

from us, but by no means is it the end of the world, if one reaches out and moves forward.

I love life and try to do everything I know I can do. I garden, walk, hike, attend a gym, take part in many different organizations as a volunteer, and last but not least, I love my life!

Light on the Path Towards Independence: My Empowering Experiences at the NFB of Washington 2013 State Convention

By Heidi Propp

Editor's note: This is a superb account of attending a National Federation of the Blind (NFB) convention. It shows the value of mentors and why NFB conventions are so beneficial. At 35 years old, this is only Heidi's second time travelling independently. It's obvious from her story that she learned some very valuable lessons and gained confidence along the way. This is a very informative mentoring piece.

On November 18, 2013, it was an honour for me to be one of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) representatives at the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Washington convention in Everett.

The NFB is a sister organization to the CFB, and is the largest organization of blind people in the United States, consisting of 50,000 members. The CFB and the NFB share a common philosophy: that the real problem of blindness is not lack of eyesight; and, with proper training and opportunity blindness may become merely a nuisance. This creates the positive attitude, that blind people can succeed in life on an equal footing with sighted peers.

The NFB has affiliate chapters in every state, each of which meet yearly during statewide conventions to network, showcase new developments of interest to the blind community, learn about a plethora of programs and services, including employment information, and more.

I received a myriad of benefits from attending this convention, which still reverberate in my life. I was empowered by the diversity of occupations and the level of independence of the blind Federationists. Every part of the convention was run by visually-impaired or blind people, just like myself. The normalcy of life, complete independence and freedom to move and explore, the pervasive belief that I could do anything I dreamed of permeated the atmosphere and touched me deeply.

It is my pleasure to share the empowering events I experienced, not only at the convention, but the excellent mentoring I received while travelling to and from Everett.

In my 35 years, this is only my second independent trip without sighted assistance. Even so, my experiences in travelling contrast starkly to that of Ryan Knighton, a blind Canadian author. During a segment of *This American Life*, he portrayed blindness as being such a crippling disability that it places a blind person in a completely different physical reality; one so different, in fact, that he spent 14 minutes on the show bemoaning the difficulties he had trying to find the phone in his hotel room. The episode may be found at:

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/464/invisible-made-visible?act=0>

As you listen, compare his disempowering words with the much brighter reality seen in the Federation. With proper training, travelling independently could become possible for more blind Canadians.

The convention took place over two days, November 18 - 19. I travelled from Victoria, B.C. with my friend and mentor Elizabeth Lalonde. We met at the Swartz Bay ferry terminal for the 9 a.m. sailing to Vancouver. We independently walked aboard the vessel as regular foot passengers. Boarding ramps were very easy to follow, alongside the handrails.

Once aboard, we explored and found the nearby entrance to the passenger decks. After purchasing our Pacific Coach Line tickets to the Vancouver bus depot, we followed our sense of smell and found the buffet serving breakfast.

In line, I determined the position of the person ahead of me by gently resting my cane tip on the very edge of the person's heel or suitcase. When I no longer felt that slight contact through my cane tip, I knew that the person had moved ahead in line, giving me the cue to move forward. After purchasing breakfast, we carried our trays to a table independently. My tray rested securely on my left hip, the fingers of my left hand clasping its edge. I used my cane in my right hand to navigate my surroundings.

At the end of the voyage, we travelled to the lower decks and boarded our bus. In transit, I researched Amtrak fares and schedules on my iPhone for our return journey. As I am totally blind, I use the iPhone's built-in screen reader, VoiceOver. It was my first experience using public WiFi on the road.

We soon disembarked at the Vancouver bus depot. With the aid of an iPhone app called BlindSquare, an accessible GPS program, we found the location of a nearby Tim Hortons. BlindSquare allowed us to become quickly acquainted with a new area by displaying streets and businesses around us. On our way, we met and followed another woman who was also going there for lunch.

After finishing a tasty meal, we headed back to the depot independently in plenty of time for our 2 p.m. Greyhound bus headed to Everett. We arrived at the Everett depot without incident at 5 p.m. The Holiday Inn, the site of the convention, sent a shuttle to pick us up.

Upon arrival at the Inn, we established room arrangements and collected our room keycode cards. Each card has a tactile tab on top that can be used to orient it in the correct position before swiping to unlock the door. I would be rooming with CFB president, Mary Ellen Gabias, and her daughter, Joanne.

As Elizabeth and I walked up to our rooms, I was immediately impressed by the widespread adoption of Braille to denote room and floor numbers, as well as what each button did in the elevators. The availability of Braille greatly facilitated my independence and exploration of the hotel. I later learned that all hotels in the US are required by law to use Braille in this manner.

To get a picture of how a lack of Braille in a large building can greatly hinder our independent travel, picture trying to navigate a seven-story hotel with no signage or placards at all. Imagine no room numbers, and elevators full of mysterious panels of buttons framed by blank plastic. To be sure, there are alternative techniques that can be used in such situations, intuition being a big help. But, Braille makes navigation much easier.

On our way up, Elizabeth showed me where on the walls the Braille numbers were located. Upon reaching my room, we smiled and parted ways, she to meet her own roommate on the 5th floor. As my roommates were occupied downstairs, I was free to completely explore the room on my own and get unpacked. I found where the facilities and the phones were. Mary Ellen and Joanne came up just before dinner at 7 p.m. I was introduced to Joanne and we headed down to the hotel ballroom for dinner.

After meeting many new people and eating an excellent meal, I decided that I would walk up to my room independently and finish unpacking before I met with friends in the lounge downstairs. Although the ballroom was located at the end of a long, carpeted hallway, it was an easy walk back to the elevators with just a couple turns along the way. When I arrived at the 7th floor, I walked forward and read the first room number I came across with my left hand. Knowing that even and odd room numbers were on opposite sides of the hall, my finger brushed an even number, indicating that I should cross the hall to the side corresponding to my odd numbered room. I walked for a ways until I estimated I was close to my room, then read the Braille numbers until I found it.

On my way back to the lobby, I discovered that if I listened for an open space with a vending machine close by, I would find the elevator door at hand. I found my friends in the lobby and we made our way to the lounge.

After a great night of conversation and meeting new people, I travelled back to my room independently. When I got off the elevator, I walked in what I thought was the

direction to my room. I reached out and read "539" adjacent to a room. Knowing that I had accidentally got out on the wrong floor, I knew I could backtrack to the elevator by listening for the area with open space and nearby vending machine. After a bit of exploration, I found the elevator and got off at the 7th floor and found my room without a hitch.

This incident exemplifies the fact that getting lost is not necessarily a bad thing. It gave me the opportunity to explore, and once I found the solution on my own, it gave me greater confidence.

In the morning, I independently travelled to the Pacific Grill and Lounge to meet some friends for breakfast. Afterwards, I went to the registration table to pay for my registration, then headed to the ballroom for the day's general meeting, in which all attendees took part. The convention's theme was "Seizing Today and Planning for Tomorrow".

I was amazed at the depth and breadth of services available to blind residents of Washington state, aimed at helping them succeed in education and employment. Examples include the partnership of the NFB with the Seattle public schools to facilitate the success of blind students; the Department of Services for the Blind; the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library; and the Seattle Lighthouse for the Blind, which focuses on increasing job opportunities and employment skills.

For me, the highlight of the day was listening to the experiences of Debby Philips, a recent graduate of the Colorado Center for the Blind, a nine-month intensive independent travel, employment readiness, and daily living skills program. It is my desire to attend the Colorado Center to greatly enhance my own independence, then bring back what I learn to Canada. I was amazed at how drastically the training had altered Debby's life. She had been living in a rural area with few travel skills and fewer ways to independently travel about the community, resulting in isolation. She emerged from Colorado with the skills and confidence to travel around town or move to another city on her own and find employment in her dream job.



*Mary Ellen Gabias and Elizabeth Lalonde speaking at the NFB of Washington State Convention
Photo by: Gail Copp*

After lunch, Elizabeth, Mary Ellen, Gail Copp and Oriano Belusic (fellow CFB members) and myself gave a presentation introducing the CFB. I discussed the reasons why I wish to attend the Colorado Center for the Blind, and was deeply touched by the positive reactions and support we received.



Heidi Propp meeting Dr. Marc Maurer and Mrs. Patricia Maurer at the NFB of Washington State Convention. Photo by: Joanne Gabias

After the general session ended, I went upstairs to get ready for the evening banquet. Before 7 p.m., I made my way back to the ballroom, found a seat and mingled and enjoyed a wonderful meal. Dr. Marc Maurer, NFB national president for many years, gave a very inspirational banquet speech following the meal. A key point that stood out for me is that training centres, like Colorado, teach not only the skills needed for a successful life, but they also teach "independence of spirit", which gives students the confidence to strive for their dreams and promotes self-respect together with a striving for independence throughout life.

During my stay at Everett, I was struck by the wide variety of professions and hobbies in which blind Americans participated. I heard about or met people working in the sciences, as teachers, doctors, lawyers, software developers, technologists, trainers, librarians, and even an amateur mechanic or two. This knowledge proves that with the right training and opportunity, blindness is no obstacle to success. It need not be the one variable that defines who we are

and what we can accomplish in life. In Canada, given that over 85 percent of blind people remain unemployed and in poverty, the dream of limitless possibilities still has a ways to go.

Inspired and energized by the banquet, I went to my room to pack for the next day's trip back to Victoria. At home, I would have been told to sit down while my family packed my belongings for me. I reveled in the opportunity to do this basic task for myself without any assistance. I was able to locate and pack away in my rolling suitcase everything I brought with me without difficulty.

The next morning, Oriano, Elizabeth, Gail and I met up for breakfast and took the shuttle to the depot three blocks away. Our itinerary included taking the 8 a.m. Amtrak train to Vancouver and then catching the Pacific Coach Lines bus to the ferry. After we purchased our tickets, we boarded the train independently.

On the train, I discovered onboard WiFi. I connected to the network and launched BlindSquare, in hopes that I would be notified of special locations as we rode by. My experience with BlindSquare greatly exceeded my expectations. I was notified of the name of each city and town as we travelled through them. I was constantly updated on nearby stores, hiking trails, bays, beaches and more. I was told the direction and distance from my position to each location. For example, I received information on Chuckanut Bay and Mud Bay as we rode by. I was given latitudes and longitudes, so I knew exactly when we crossed the Canadian/American border.

The experience was very much akin to what a sighted person would see when looking out of the train's windows. It gave me a mental map of the land as we travelled.

As we passed through customs, we learned that declaration forms were not available in Braille or other accessible formats. Fortunately, we were able to answer all questions orally.

As we approached the Vancouver depot, I learned how to independently travel within and between the train cars as we made our way to the outside doors. This was my first time travelling aboard a train. We arrived at the Vancouver depot without a hitch. After a stop-over for lunch, Elizabeth, Oriano and I boarded our final bus, taking us to the ferry.

Aboard ship, I was given the opportunity to explore and find the cafeteria so that I could get some supper. Using my sense of smell and a little help, I found the cafeteria and purchased my meal. After finishing, I explored and hooked up with my friends for the final leg of the journey.

Elizabeth's parents graciously offered to drive me home. On the way, we told stories of our experiences and the things we had learned.

On the whole, my convention represented a taste of complete independence and freedom, similar to what I would receive at a training centre, like Colorado. I enjoyed it immensely, making the most of every moment.

Contrast this with the words of Ryan Knighton, who insisted that blindness is such a terrible tragedy, that it prevented him from completing such basic tasks as exploring his own hotel room.

Help Blind Canadians by Donating Aeroplan Miles

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) will use donated miles to fly blind Canadians to the next NFB Blindness Convention. This unique week-long gathering of over 3,000 blind people from around the world is an exceptional educational and mentoring experience. There is no comparable opportunity that offers the blind so much in such an intensive and compact session. Those who have had a chance to attend in the past consider it life-changing.

Many blind Canadians are isolated and do not come in contact with other blind people in their daily lives. What's more, many blind people lack confidence, blindness-specific skills and information. To meet and be mentored by blind people who are positive, capable and successful is the best way for any blind person to learn about blindness and one's own potential.

In addition, numerous blindness-related supports are offered, including hands-on demonstrations of the latest blindness technologies, resources and aids. Blind speakers hold talks on topics of accomplishments, education and rehabilitation, Braille, employment, cane travel, independence, advocacy and inspiration.

The convention is held annually in a large North American city. The most favorable accommodation rates are provided, along with good transportation links to enable as many blind participants as possible to attend.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is truly trying to change what it means to be blind. We feel strongly that enabling blind people to participate in this extraordinarily positive and inspirational convention is the best way to maximize their chance for a better life.

Please help us raise the miles necessary so that more blind Canadians may benefit. Also, if you know of anyone who may be interested in contributing to this cause, please let them know about this Aeroplan charitable pooling initiative. Thank you for your support! To donate Aeroplan miles, please go to:

<http://beyondmiles.aeroplan.com/eng/partners/546>

The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind Blind People in Charge on Vancouver Island

By Elizabeth Lalonde

The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) launches demonstration project in Victoria, B.C. and Nanaimo, B.C.

“Blind people empowering blind people to be employed, independent and free.”

The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB), is a nonprofit service organization based in British Columbia. In January 2014, PTCB received a grant from the BC Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation and the Disability Without Poverty Network, to teach employment skills to blind adults in Victoria, BC, and Nanaimo, BC, who are receiving disability assistance benefits.

This two-day-per-week program, known as 'Blind People in Charge', teaches blind adults independence and blindness-specific employment skills, such as Braille, adaptive technology, cane travel, confidence-building, bus transportation, resume writing and interview skills, cooking, life skills, and most importantly, a positive perspective on blindness.



Blind People in Charge participants near the Victoria waterfront.

Photo Credit: Erin Ford.



Blind People in Charge participants on a Victoria sidewalk. Courtesy: PTCB

The Blind People In Charge Program teaches using a strength-based experiential model, known as structured discovery, an empowering, problem-solving approach to gain skills, where the learner takes charge of the experience and learns by doing. Instead of simply memorizing travel routes (the traditional method of teaching blind people “orientation and mobility”), the blind person learns to decipher clues and landmarks in the environment, such as texture changes on the ground, the feel of the sun, and the directional sound of traffic, to judge his or her location.

Another component of this method involves wearing a blindfold or sleepshades, if one has any residual vision. This allows the person to focus on learning nonvisual skills, without the often detrimental distraction of the weakest sense. Once the individual develops confidence with these nonvisual skills, the residual vision then becomes an augment to their skills, instead of the main sense on which they rely.

As well as cane travel, participants in the Blind People In Charge Program take part in recreational and community events, go on excursions, learn to cook, read Braille, and hold regular discussions about issues related to blindness, the abilities of blind people, and how to cope with blindness in a positive and productive way.

Ultimately, participants of the program become mentors themselves and share with newer participants the skills, knowledge and positive perspectives they have learned.

Program participants take on activities that encourage them to get involved in the community and leaders work with participants to develop employment plans and find job internships.

“The unemployment rate among blind adults is unacceptably high,” said Elizabeth Lalonde, Director of the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind. “This funding will go a long way towards giving employment opportunities for people that desperately want to be included in the workforce. This will, in turn, create opportunities for others in the future.”

It is Lalonde's belief that if blind adults can learn skills that allow them to compete in a workforce dominated by the sighted, it will help break down barriers that exist due to commonly-held misconceptions that blind people are helpless.

“The simple truth is that blind people are not helpless. A blind person can do pretty much anything anyone else can. All they need is the right training and the opportunity,” said Lalonde.

Two of the participants are no longer using BC Transit's 'HandyDart' service and are coming to and from the program independently using the bus. Others are working towards this goal.

All participants are learning to walk independently with their long white canes without using a sighted guide, and demonstrate a growing confidence to move around their surroundings on their own.

One participant, who has lived in a group home for most of his life, is learning some basic skills, such as how to pour liquids, make a bed, and cut his own food - things that well-meaning, but overprotective sighted people have always done for him.

Many program participants have engaged in planning complex meals, grocery shopping, cleaning, and have prepared dishes, such as honey lime chicken and mashed potatoes, stir fries, peanut butter chocolate squares, corn bread and more.

One participant said that she is now motivated to go grocery shopping on her own, even though she knew her parents didn't think she could do this. In fact, her father wanted to go with her and follow her around the store.

"I knew [grocery shopping] would be a hugely valuable skill-building exercise. I'd never travelled on my own anywhere near this strip mall before. I did it to build my own skills and confidence," she said. "I have to look at this experience in a positive way: at least my parents now know I can shop on my own, to one degree or another, which is a small but encouraging step forward."

"I had such a wonderful time today," said another participant. "It felt so good to be engaged in conversation and be part of a group of common goals, but also individual strengths. Walking to the bus stop, I felt like I was walking a little taller and holding my head a little higher."

"Being in this program, I feel like I am expanding," said yet another participant. "I feel like I am open to new things."

The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind was one of only 12 groups identified by the Disability Without Poverty Network to deliver services to its intended audience, adults in BC currently receiving disability assistance benefits.



Heidi Propp and Elizabeth Lalonde (in sleep shades) grocery shopping at a Victoria supermarket. Photo courtesy: PTCB.

The Blind People in Charge Program accepts participants on a continuous intake basis. Interested blind and partially-blind people in Victoria and Nanaimo should contact the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind via its website at www.PacificTrainingCentre.ca, by email at info@PacificTrainingCentre.ca, or by phone at 250-590-9048.

ABOUT THE PACIFIC TRAINING CENTRE FOR THE BLIND

The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind is a non-profit Canadian service organization, founded and run by blind people. It is a registered charity and can provide tax deductible receipts for donations.

Started in 2011, the centre provides services and programs based on a positive and empowering philosophy of blindness. Project leaders instill a belief in blind people's own capabilities and in the limitless possibilities open to them, with a non-custodial approach (ie: It is not about sighted people doing things for the blind; it is about blind people doing things for themselves. And, it is about blind teachers working with blind students to increase skills and confidence.)

The Blind People In Charge Program is the first step towards building a much-needed intensive, blindness immersion training program in BC, and in fact, all of Canada. The full intensive program will be similar to the highly successful National Federation of the Blind (NFB) residential-style centres in Louisiana, Minnesota and Colorado, where 80 per cent of graduates find employment or pursue post-secondary education that leads to employment (National Federation of the Blind), and where centre graduates earn on average \$11,000 more per year than people who have not graduated from a centre (Louisiana Tech Institute on Blindness, 2011).

Louisiana Center for the Blind www.lcb-ruston.com
Colorado Center for the Blind www.cocenter.org
Blind Inc., Minnesota www.blindinc.org

My Panterra Eco Cruise

By Erin Lacharity

Editor's note: In 2009, Erin graduated from the University of Victoria with a bachelor's degree in Women's Studies. This accomplishment was celebrated in February 2014 by Erin and her parents. Below is her story, based on her trip blog.

My name is Erin and I am 34 years old. It wouldn't be so extraordinary that I'm writing this, until you understand that when I was born at 20 weeks, I only weighed 1 pound 4 ounces, ending up at 15 ounces during my very early entrance into this world. Had it

not been for the extreme perseverance of my mother, and the amazing medical team headed by Victoria pediatrician, Dr. Jagdis, I would not have survived much beyond birth. Not only did I require regular blood transfusions from my mom, I also required open heart surgery. Because I was so premature, I required continuous oxygen to stay alive, which caused retinopathy of prematurity. Although I had multiple surgeries, eyesight was not going to be for me. But, look at me now!

It is hard for sighted people to understand day to day challenges of a vision-impaired or blind individual, but when you are dealt these cards, you deal with it. Learning landmarks, such as differences in textures of poured concrete or the neighbour's stepping stones, guide me to my location. It is a world where tactile surfaces determine whether you are looking at a picture of a whale or a boat. Vision is a gift. However, it isn't required to live life fully and I am here to tell you the world of the blind can be just as fulfilling as that of a sighted person.

I struggled through grade school and eventually entered college and then university. I recently graduated from the University of Victoria with a bachelor's degree in Women's Studies.

Because I completed university, my parents offered a trip of my choice and when I heard about the Panterra Eco Cruise, I knew it was for me.

Welcome to Cabo!

My arrival to Mexico was unbelievable - leaving Victoria, BC, in the winter and now, here in Cabo, enjoying 80 degrees and sunny skies. The mood is high energy. Vendors are everywhere, trying to sell everything from t-shirts to timeshares. Restaurants offer their specials and margaritas for "happy hour", which seems to last from 11 a.m. until 10 p.m.! But, it is exciting.

The marina is full of boats, some of them private yachts and many offer fishing and sightseeing charters.

And, lions! Well, lion cubs. One of the area zoos offers pictures with lion cubs to raise money. Yep, I have the picture! My mom and I take the opportunity to hold this baby lion cub! He is so cute, but he seems uncomfortable in our arms. It is as if he's had too many hands and arms holding him and he just wants to sleep in peace. There are many pictures taken. I am surprised at how coarse his fur is. His tail is long and he is limp in my arms from sleeping, yet he's restless. He would rather be free! This was a memorable experience for us. I find myself appreciating wildlife more.

As for the terrain! Well, let's just say if you plan on navigating yourself around the streets of Cabo...don't try it alone! Home in Canada, we complain if there's a little bump in the sidewalk. Down here, there may not be a sidewalk, or if there is, it suddenly becomes 3 feet higher, or a big tree is in the middle of it, or maybe there's a huge gaping hole, followed by an old car, forcing you to walk on the street!

Dolphins!

The day before we are to leave for La Paz, we are surprised with a visit from Lela. She meets us at the hotel with her friend Angelica, who is going to be my best friend for the cruise. "What is your favourite sea animal?" Lela asks. "Dolphins," I answer. All I was told that morning was to put my swimsuit on.

After a drive to San Jose del Cabo, we all climb out of the car and head out to a trail where the sound of surf and dolphins are heard. We listen and watch in awe as dolphins swim and play. We follow Lela to the docks and she gives us the surprise of a lifetime! We are going to swim with the dolphins! We get our wetsuits on and head further down the docks toward the enclosure where the baby dolphins are. We were taught a few signals for the dolphins, to get them to kiss, shake hands, hug, and hold.

We enter the water which is cold at first, but after a few minutes I am used to it. The baby dolphin that I am to touch is called Barlam. She is the first dolphin born at Dolphin Discovery Mexico and her name means firstborn.

When I touch Barlam for the first time, she is soft yet solid like hard rubber. Her skin has many scars due to sibling rivalry from the other young dolphins in the enclosure. Despite this, she is a beautiful animal! When her small fins touch my hands, I am overwhelmed by her sweetness and innocence. I begin to feel a love for nature that is deeper than I have known. Like a flame rising, it fills me with each encounter with Barlam, and later, with Aryal. The feel of Barlam's tiny nose on my cheek is thrilling and cute beyond words!

After visiting with Barlam, we head to the bigger enclosure where the adult females are. Aryal is the dolphin that I hug and hold. She is innocent too. She seems restless though, in my arms. I push her away gently as instructed. I am thankful for this experience which helps me to connect with the love of nature and appreciate its beauty.

The food of Mexico is amazing and I cannot get enough. It is a lazy couple of days in Cabo before we check out of our downtown hotel and take a van ride with Manny. On our way to La Paz, we stop at Hotel California in Todos Santos. Yes, we were able to leave! We are now at the marina to board the *Adventura*, a 125-foot converted supply boat. I like the supplies - 3 types of beer on tap and margaritas made by Joel! Joel also made up our luxurious staterooms of 24 square feet during the trip.

Aboard Adventure

The cruise on the boat is here! We board the boat around 6 p.m. on Thursday, February 27. When I am settled into my stateroom and unpacked, I am offered a margarita by Angie. She is a beautiful and fun person, and becomes a good friend. The food is excellent on the boat. There was tortilla soup, fish tacos, and other meals with a Mexican twist, made by Omar. We have a wonderful evening meeting the other people who will be cruising with us.

The next morning arrives and we are off to a 7 a.m. start. We load into the panga boats and head for an excursion around some islands. We eventually end up at a sea lion colony. I hear barking of the lions and feel more connected with nature and more at peace. It is cool and the wind is light on my skin. Many pictures are taken. We return to the boat and then load into the kayaks. Angie and I kayak to where the sea lions are. It is surreal and amazing to hear them swim and bark just feet away!

This same island is also home to many birds, including the brown-footed booby and the blue-footed booby. OK, who named these birds boobies? On the tops of the island there is a mountain of bird guano. I find it fascinating and slightly gross that a mountain of bird crap is on this island. From a distance, it looks like snow! I imagine a Christmas tree-shaped structure and the birds perch on it.

After this excursion, we go to the boat and cruise to an island where only 5 families live. They have been living here since 1923, fishing and trading their goods with the mainland. There are many things to see on this tiny island, such as an old mausoleum, erected to honour family members who died there. They had also collected many different species of clam shells, which felt soft yet solid.

There is a beautiful Labrador dog, named Luna. She followed us everywhere. She is so sweet tempered and excited to be near new people. Her tail wags excitedly when we give her attention. Many cactus and other plants live on this island, named Parida.

Snorkeling for the First Time

We travel back to the sea lion colony for a more intimate visit. First, I go kayaking with Angie, then the new challenge is snorkeling. Angie and I go over how to put the mask on and how to put the snorkel in my mouth. After this, we pull our wetsuits on. I am pleasantly surprised and loving how hot-looking I feel in mine! It holds me in and I feel 10 pounds lighter!

Other people, including my mom and dad, are jumping off the back of the boat to snorkel around the island. Angie and I go into the panga and are taken to shore. I put on the mask. It feels as though I am suffocating, but I know I'm not, because when I put the snorkel into my mouth and breathe, I feel safe and calm. When I breathe slowly, I feel calmer. I feel Angie holding onto my suit and I am calmer still, because I know that there is someone there if I have a problem.

I must concentrate on only breathing through my mouth. It is not as easy as it looks, because several times, water comes into my mask and I have to clear it. I glory in my new found freedom of being able to breathe underwater! We try snorkeling a few more times in the shallows. I touch all kinds of sea plants, rocks and mossy plants. I am astonished at how alive everything is in the warm water. I am amazed at how free and alive I feel.

When I return to the boat, Lela asks me in front of everyone having their lunch, "How was your first snorkeling experience?" I answer, "It was (&%\$#*&) awesome!"

Everyone fell into raucous laughter at my blunt expression!

Whale Sharks

The whale sharks are a wonderful experience as well. Whale sharks are the largest fish in the world and they give birth to half their school live and the rest are eggs. They are docile, but are indeed, giants of the fish! We are fortunate to have Deni on board today, a marine biologist who specializes in whale sharks. We all load into the pangas after Deni's presentation, hoping to find one of these magnificent creatures! Off in the distance we see a fin, and upon closer investigation, it is in fact, a whale shark.

It's a mad rush to get into the water. Whale sharks travel at approximately 5 km per hour, but that is difficult to catch up to, when you are snorkeling. The panga creeps ahead of the whale shark and the order is made, "Jump and swim! Swim!" I know I must swim fast to try to catch up to the mammoth monster of the deep! When I get onto the edge of the panga, I am surprised at a gripping fear that holds me back from jumping into the cool water with snorkel and fins at the ready. I tremble and feel completely out of control, out of my comfort zone, yet I know I must conquer it.

"I don't have any balance!" I cry to myself, as I feel Angie encouraging me to jump, by pulling gently on my legs. Finally, I become more confident. You can trust Angie and yourself and you're not falling hundreds of feet. Finally, I do it! It feels exhilarating to overcome the fear and trepidation of letting myself fall off a moving boat into the water.

There are no sounds of birds today, just a silence that captivates me by its vastness! As I snorkel, I am awed by the presence of this gigantic shark that makes this silence so eerie and arresting. I concentrate on my breathing and try to swim fast. When I snorkel under the water, the silence is deeper, as is the presence of the whale shark. I swim hard to try to catch up! I finally surface. I still feel the presence of the whale shark. I can hear other snorkelers swimming and talking. We all climb back into the pangas and head back to Adventure. We are all in awe by this experience! It has been a trip highlight!!

The Last Day Aboard Adventure

The last day on the boat dawns beautiful, but slightly chilly. During breakfast, David excitedly announces that there is a whale at the bow of the boat! We all rush to the front outer deck to catch the show with our Nikons and iPhone cameras! We, then, load into the pangas and madly catch up with it, so we can witness it surface for air. It is a blue whale, the biggest whale in the world! We are all ecstatic to see this beautiful creature give us a show only 2 to 5 feet away from the side of the pangas!

We come back to the boat and pack up for the trip into La Paz. It was a glorious send off from the Sea of Cortez, in Mexico!

La Paz and Carnival

The trip into La Paz is long, but exciting, because it is the last night of the carnival for the season of Lent. As we arrive into town, we can hear music everywhere! Thousands

of people arrive for the festivities. I cannot believe how much positive energy there is in the air. I've witnessed a lot of parades and fairs, but this one tops them all with electric energy, like a young heart, pulsing throughout the city of La Paz! It is a fun night of revelry and good food. Later, I try to sleep, but partying goes long into the night.

Miss Carima and the Little Punk

Whale watching is on the agenda for the last day of this amazing Panterra adventure. We load into vans for a 2 to 3 hour trek to Magdalena Bay. We arrive and load into a much larger panga than I am used to. Oh, but joy! The leather seats are quite comfortable. Before heading out into the open water of the bay, we take a tour through a mangrove and view many varieties of beautiful birds.

Off we go out into the open water, wind flying through my hair. At one point, Angie says, "Put your arms up in the air, girl! We're flying!" I giggle with pleasure over the ever-present electric energy that is Angie, who has worked so hard to make this such a memorable trip!

When we spot Miss Carima and her baby, we are again ecstatic! She is a majestic grey whale, with her weeks-old baby in tow. The cameras and my iPhone with Bosjock, a recording app, come out to record the sounds of Miss Carima and her little one coming up for air.

Exhaling from their blowholes sounds like peace to me. The connection with nature I've had during the trip, comes flooding back. It is breathtakingly beautiful and beyond compare, to imagine a big grey whale swimming with a much smaller one beside her! I am once again overwhelmed by the majesty that these animals have in the ocean.

After an hour and a half, we stop for lunch at a seaside village, inhabited with, maybe, 50 people. Their remoteness is exemplified by pictures, showing vehicles which were carried from the mainland to the island on pangas tied together.

We are served breaded shrimp and other delicious foods and a beer to wash it down! We go out for another hour and meet Monica, a lone grey whale, who may be sick due to a skin infection. She is as beautiful as the other whales. It is Monica that I want to reach out and touch, but I settle for her gentle blowing sounds.

At the end of this excursion, my cup of happiness is overflowing! When we come back, a group of dolphins are spotted. They surround our panga. One even surfaces near me! It is as if they're saying, "Goodbye. See you next time! We love you!"

Experiencing these whales, and all the other creatures, reminds me they aren't any different than us humans. If it wasn't for my mom's nurturing, I wouldn't be here today, and I now see the relationship is just the same in the wild.

Panterra has offered me a close up experience that I will never forget.
Thanks mom and dad for helping me to fulfill this amazing dream.

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On the Buses in Victoria

By Doris Belusic

Come with me for a bus trip. Be a little bug on my shoulder. Incognito. Keep your eyes and ears wide open. Learn what it's like to be a blind transit user in Victoria, B.C. But please, no swearing.

I am waiting for my bus at the multi-bus stop zone downtown on Fort Street, just around the corner from Douglas Street. I am not exactly sure where to stand - the area designated for people to wait for buses is a long expanse of sidewalk. The buses pull in anywhere along this bus stop. The area is busy with bus shelters, garbage cans, sign posts and people.

A bus pulls in. I make my way to the door of the bus. I ask the driver the bus number. It's not mine.

This stop can accommodate three or four buses in a row at once. Often, buses pull in behind the first. The motors are loud. I cannot hear when other buses pull in further down the curb. And, those buses behind, usually leave from behind. It's easy to miss or be missed by the bus you want.

One day, I waited for my bus in the rain. I always keep my white cane visible. Twice in a row, the bus I wanted did not stop where I was standing – by the bus stop sign and shelter. Instead, the bus pulled in and left from further down the curb, behind other buses. A sighted person informed me when I asked about my bus number.

Sometimes sighted people tell me the bus numbers as the buses come. Other times, I guess where and when a bus arrives, then move with my white cane along the curb edge, between things and people, to the hopeful, right location. It's often a guessing game.

It would help if buses exit sequentially from the top or a “yellow zone” of a multi-bus stop zone, like they do in some large cities of the world. That way, people would know where to stand to catch the bus, since each bus would move forward to the top of the queue or touch a “yellow zone” before exiting.

I board my bus and ask the driver to call out my stop, please. The next challenge is finding a seat. Each bus has different seat configurations, so seat locations or sitting directions are not a given. Transit riders are helpful and often tell me where there's an empty seat. I sit.

We're on our way. There are no cues telling me the route or the streets we pass. It's a good thing I am heading somewhere I go often, so I know the route the bus takes. But,

I cannot see when I get to my destination. Here is where a call out by the bus driver is crucial.

As I sit in my seat, I wonder if this driver will remember to call out my stop – or forget. My mind is vigilant. I don't relax. I don't want to pass my stop. A driver's memory lapse is all it takes to have me go zooming past it. Imagine the frustration, difficulty and time spent by a blind person after a missed call out, not to mention the slap on dignity and confidence. In my experience, the drivers frequently forget to call out requested stops.

I have heard many similar stories from other blind transit users - capable blind travellers, who just need a reliable call out.

It is my vigilance that allows me to know where the bus is. When I think my stop is close, I sometimes clamber up the aisle of the moving bus to ask the driver our whereabouts - or, I'll ask a sighted rider.

If I happen to change my mind and decide to get off the bus early during the trip, I am out of luck to know where along the route the bus is. Maybe I want to get off early to walk the rest of the way for exercise, or maybe, to stop at a store. But, not knowing where the bus is along its route poses a problem.

In a modern society like ours, transit accessibility for the disabled is a right. This includes the blind. We are tax-payers like other citizens.

Bus ramps and kneeling floors make buses accessible to those with mobility disabilities. People with wheelchairs, walkers, rolling suitcases and baby strollers benefit. And, bicycle racks are on the front of each bus for cyclists. It's the visually impaired and blind who are left behind.

Not long ago, I got on a bus and asked the driver to call my stop, please. The driver responded by telling me to remind him. I wondered how and when I'd do that from my seat mid-way back in the bus.

The situation on the buses is different on each bus route and at differing times of the day. Often the buses are full of people standing, making communication with the driver more difficult.

I wonder about the many people in our community with severe vision limitations, who are not easily identifiable as visually impaired. Nine out of ten visually-impaired Victorians do not even use a white cane or guide dog.

This time, the driver calls out my stop. I get up and leave with the usual thank you to the driver.

Victoria is popular as a senior's retirement city. It is also widely known for its tourism industry. Canadian cities, like Vancouver and Ottawa, and many other North American

cities, have installed automated annunciation systems onboard their transit buses, which call out all stops. An automated annunciation system would benefit everyone.

B.C. Transit needs to recognize the inaccessibility of its transit service, and, the importance of providing good service to all its users.

Breaking Down Barriers: Blazing a Trail Towards an Accessible World Wide Web

By Heidi Propp

As the Internet evolves and becomes more deeply embedded in all of our lives, it is even more imperative today that blind and visually-impaired people not be shut out of the Information Age simply because they cannot see a computer screen. Now, more than ever, the Internet is the gateway to education and prosperity. The plethora of accessibility standards, solutions, validation tools and accessibility consultants enables your website to be accessible to everyone with some small design changes

According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 285 million people worldwide are blind or visually impaired, of which approximately 1 million currently reside in Canada. As our population ages, these figures are projected to increase in the future due to age-related eye conditions such as age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma.

As do most Canadians, millions of blind and visually-impaired people integrate the World Wide Web into their daily lives: shopping, banking, doing business, learning, socializing, trip planning, and so much more.

Those with low vision have an extensive array of tools to make reading text on the computer easier. These include dedicated software magnifiers such as ZoomText, customizable cascading style sheets that provide improved color contrast, enlarged fonts, and zoom features built into many Web browsers. However, not all text or images enlarge well and can appear broken, unclear or blurry. Enlarged graphics can become blocky and pixilated. Sites designed with low contrasting colors, such as blue links on a black background, are very difficult to read, making it unclear as to which text is a link and what is not.

Blind and very low-vision computer users take advantage of free and commercial screen readers, software applications that can identify text output, window elements and controls, documents, Web pages and more, then present that information via synthesized speech or Braille to the user. These tools give blind people unprecedented

access to information, shopping and business opportunities. However, many barriers, such as unlabeled images, inaccessible captchas, image maps with poorly named links (or links with no associated text at all) can quickly make a website difficult or impossible to use.

These barriers to access, and others like them, may be overcome by implementing a few key website design changes that will make your site more accessible to a substantially greater global audience. Equal access to the Web gives blind and visually-impaired Canadians the keys they need to participate in the social and economic life of a society on an equal footing with their sighted peers.

To a great extent, blind Canadians use the Web as their main portal for accessing all kinds of information unavailable in the physical world, such as reading books, news, travel information, research, looking up phone numbers or recipes, learning about new hobbies, and so much more. In many instances, shopping on the Web is much easier than visiting a local store and shopping with the assistance of a sighted person. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes Web accessibility as a basic human right.

Increasing your website's accessibility has benefits outside of the visually-impaired demographic. As our population ages, many people will develop age-related impairments such as reduced contrast sensitivity and colour perception, difficulty reading Web pages, and fine motor control that makes it more difficult to use a mouse.

Further, mobile Web users experience similar barriers when accessing content on a mobile device. For example, a mobile device may not support MouseOver elements, a common barrier to keyboard users. Some devices do not support Flash, and many mobile users are unwilling to download long or multimedia intensive pages so to save on bandwidth charges. For some complex Websites, such as Audible or Facebook, some blind users take advantage of the mobile version, rather than the main site, while using a desktop PC.

Businesses that provide shopping or other paid services will benefit financially from increased accessibility, as conducting business online can be easier than doing the same thing in the physical world. If a blind shopper visits a retail store or business, he or she may first browse the site to get an idea of what is available.

Accessibility is even more critical to governmental or financial agencies as more and more citizen participation and financial management is done online. In many cases, blind or visually-impaired individuals may prefer electronic financial information, as it is easier to read and keep records.

The Web Accessibility Initiative, organized by the W3C, publishes guidelines that website owners can follow to increase accessibility. The latest guidelines, WCAG 2.0, may be found at <http://www.w3.org/TR/2008/REC-WCAG20-20081211/>

As mentioned above, low-vision users of your site will find it more useable if high contrast between background and foreground colors is available. If your site's colour scheme cannot be changed, please consider providing a navbar link to a high contrast cascading style sheet. Avoid using small font sizes whenever possible to minimize reading difficulty. If you have an image with text inside it, the text will need to stand out from the background colour. Avoid combinations such as blue links on black backgrounds. To increase compatibility with magnifiers, it is important when sizing elements to specify percentages instead of pixels.

To maximize useability for color blind users, it is important not to use color as the sole means of communicating information in an image, Web page element, or a block of text. Although color blindness is a very complex topic, the most common colours affected are red and green.

The following design tips will be especially helpful to blind screen reader users. All images should be tagged with an alt attribute, containing a brief description of what the picture looks like. This is not necessary for purely decorative imagery. Mark all major regions of a page, such as article titles, informational sections, or types of goods with heading tags or Aria markup. To make captchas useable, consider providing an audio captcha alternative. For example, the free reCaptcha scripts support dual audio and image captcha formats. To find out more, go to:

<http://code.google.com/p/recaptcha/wiki/HowToSetUpRecaptcha>

If your site uses Flash or the new HTML5 canvas tag, either clearly label all controls and elements or provide an optional basic HTML alternative.

If your site contains tables, please use the summary attribute to give an overview of the table to make it easier for screen readers to interpret. Associating the header cells with relevant data cells with either the scope or ID attribute will enable a screen reader to read the appropriate header before text within a cell is spoken.

If image maps are present on your site, please minimize the use of MouseOvers, instead provide appropriately labeled text-based links, or an accessible alternative comprising of standard HTML links.

In regard to HTML forms, it is helpful to describe the purpose of the form, specifying necessary input. If descriptive labels are associated with each form control, a screen reader will speak the type of information being asked for, followed by the type of form control. For example, a well labeled edit field asking users for their postal code will sound like this: "Postal code, edit". A form control may be labeled using the <label> tag containing the form "control name" attribute and matching ID attribute inside the relevant form control tag. If information for a field is required to be in a specific format, provide a text description when user format falls outside this format. After a form is submitted, please make validation error messages and success messages easy to locate, preferably near the top or bottom of the page.

Typically, the main content is not the first thing a screen reader finds on a Web page. To avoid having to navigate through a long list of links, form fields, and social media widgets before the main content is found, it is helpful to use a "skip navigation" link that takes visitors directly to the page's main content, typically located near the top of the page where it can be easily found. To minimize the aesthetic impact to your page, this link may be hidden until it receives keyboard focus. Please visit <http://webaim.org/techniques/css/invisiblecontent/> to learn techniques for providing information to screen readers that is invisible to the sighted public.

Many blind and visually-impaired users appreciate interactivity features found on many modern Web pages that use JavaScript. With a few simple techniques, your JavaScript-enabled elements can be very accessible. Difficulties arise when events do not trigger because the event handler is expecting mouse input rather than keyboard. Therefore, it is important to use device independent event handlers for scripts that modify content. Examples include: onFocus, onBlur, onSelect, onChange, and onClick. Alternatively, simultaneous keyboard and mouse-based handlers may be used to maximize useability for all audience demographics. If using flyout or complex dropdown menus, include keyboard shortcuts or provide an alternative basic HTML menu.

For developers looking to take advantage of features in the recent HTML5 standard, go to <http://www.html5accessibility.com/> to discover cross-browser accessibility implementation of new tags such as article, audio and canvas. As of this writing, accessible implementation of HTML5's new features is inconsistent, and in some cases incomplete, depending on browser manufacturer.

Websites containing Rich Internet applications and dynamic content developed using AJAX or JavaScript can be difficult, if not impossible to navigate with screen readers for a variety of reasons. Screen readers cannot determine the purpose of custom interface elements and controls. Pages may not automatically update as content changes. A solution to these issues was devised by the Web Accessibility Initiative called Accessible Rich Internet Applications, or ARIA for short. Developers can mark regions of a page with attributes such as menus, regions, tree views, calendar functions, allowing screen readers to present this information in an accessible format that sometimes mimics the look and feel of desktop applications. ARIA can be used to mark major regions of a page, allowing users to jump to the main content with just a single keystroke. ARIA can map live AJAX regions and events, providing live content updates and dynamic feedback based on user input. The latest release of the ARIA specifications may be found at <http://www.w3.org/TR/wai-aria/>

With your help, we can make the dream of equal opportunity and equal access to information on the Web a reality. To get started, online validation tools exist to test your site's accessibility and in some cases may suggest improvements. Please visit <http://webaim.org/articles/tools/> for more details.

The Blind Leading the Sighted?

By Frederick Driver

*Speech delivered at "The Blind Leading the Blind" Convention
Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), May 2008, Victoria, B.C.*

Editor's Note: This is a well-researched and inspiring article about many very successful blind people - leaders - throughout history.

Our convention theme being "The Blind Leading the Blind", I'm going to speak on "The Blind Leading the Sighted."

Did you know that one of London's first and greatest police chiefs was blind?

Sir John Fielding was born in 1721. He became blind in 1740, and opened a business called the Universal Register Office - an insurance, real estate, travel, labour, and information office. He ran it single-handed, while learning law from his brother, novelist Henry Fielding, who was also Chief Magistrate - which post would later be known as Chief of the Metropolitan Police.

When Henry retired in 1754, the position was offered to John. He expanded his predecessor's program of efficiency and modernization, becoming known as "the blind beak of Bow Street", beak being slang for a police officer or authority figure.

He held the office until his death in 1780, breaking most of London's criminal gangs, setting up mounted patrols, and establishing communication systems. John Fielding was knighted for his services by King George III in 1761.

From a National Federation of the Blind (NFB) *Kernel Book*:

"People often feel that law enforcement is no field for a blind person even to consider. They don't realize that one of the first and greatest police officials ran the London Metropolitan Police for twenty-six years without the aid of any sight."

In present day law enforcement, we have Alain Thonet and Sacha van Loo. Thonet is university-educated; Van Loo speaks seven languages fluently and recognizes many more. They are just two of six blind detectives hired by the Belgian police as members of an anti-terrorism, drug-trafficking and organized-crime communication-surveillance unit in Brussels and Antwerp.

Van Loo says, "People are afraid of employing blind people. I want to knock down these kinds of prejudices and widen people's perspective, not just in the police force, but in all fields."

Another field in which the blind often meet with discrimination and resistance in the pursuit of a career is the practice of medicine. So let's look at the life of Dr. Jacob

Bolotin (1888-1924), the first man, fully blind since birth, to be fully licensed to practice medicine.

Born to poor immigrant parents, he had to fight prejudice and misconceptions about the capabilities of the blind, to enter medical school. He became one of the most respected physicians of his day in Chicago, renowned for his expertise in the area of heart and lung diseases.

An example from present day medicine is Dr. Mark Stracks, an MD and psychiatrist in Pennsylvania. Recently, in the NFB magazine, *Braille Monitor*, he described, among other things, his treatment in therapy of a Vietnam vet.

Here is what Dr. Stracks says about his work:

"There is something wonderful about being in a position to serve others. There is something exceptionally satisfying in the knowledge that one can develop a set of skills that can be put to use in the aiding and comforting of those who are ill or in distress... To heal... to help others along the paths of their own healing evoke[s] [a] combination of awe and humility in the practitioner, and there exists a powerful yet humbling understanding within all physicians that they are the bearers of an ongoing tradition that has spanned millennia."

The *Saturday Evening Post* of March 15th, 1958, contains the article, "The Lady Boss of Faraway Ranch".

It's the story of Lillian Riggs, a fully blind woman who ran a giant cattle ranch in a wild and rugged region of Arizona. The nearest grocery was 37 miles away.

She became blind in 1942. Her husband, who had run the ranch, died in 1950. From then on, she ran the whole operation, inspecting her lands and cattle, hiring staff, and buying, selling and caring for livestock - with competence and confidence equal to that of her predecessor.

It was a 7000-acre ranch; from 200 to 350 head of cattle. It also had accommodation for up to two dozen visiting tourists. She and one of her employees gave the author a tour of the ranch on horseback. She rode the range regularly; participated in the roundups, branding and inoculation of her cattle; supervised the buying, weighing and selling; and prescribed treatment for any that were ailing.

When she wasn't riding the range, tending her cattle, or looking after managerial responsibilities, she was making beds, sweeping floors, ironing, lugging well water, or keeping abreast of the cattleman's newsletter.

One of the biggest challenges for Riggs and other ranchers was drought. On that score, Riggs said, "But it takes a lot of trouble to beat us down. Not many ranchers

have quit. Once you have lived here, you don't want to live anywhere else... We may sell our cattle; we don't often sell our land."

At age seventy, the blind lady boss of Faraway ranch was still in the saddle.

In 1899, the New York journal, *Success*, ran an article on recent college graduate, John Swearingen, blind since age 7. Here is an excerpt:

"Blind, He Bears Off the Honors... Recently graduated from the South Carolina College at the age of twenty, taking the full classical course and making the highest record, during the entire four years, of any man since the founding of the college, the first part of this century. He was first honor man, delivering an oration... Dr. J.W. Flynn [who] spent years in half a dozen colleges of high standing, including Heidelberg... said... "I have never met a man to compare with Swearingen. I sincerely regret the alumni have not a fund to send him to the best places in the world, thoroughly to develop his powers. His family has not the means to do this.

In whatever he undertakes, he must stand at the top. He is uncertain whether to study for the ministry or the law. As a lawyer he would achieve great success, even before a jury, and he would make a mark as an author...

In such branches as mathematics, astronomy and psychology, as now taught, where the sense of sight would be considered so important, Swearingen never faltered. He answered, with less than two minutes' thought, a complex 'catch' mathematical proposition that I have never had answered by another student. He has a perfect conception of the relative positions and distances of heavenly bodies, and experienced no difficulty in drawing correctly geometrical figures."

Now, that was written in 1899, when Swearingen had only just graduated. I bet you're wondering what became of him afterwards.

Well, the *Braille Monitor* informs us in 2001 that Swearingen, who was fully blind, went on to get a doctorate, taught in the public school system, and was elected to seven separate terms as the Superintendent of Education in South Carolina.

"Blind Latina interprets for AT&T services", says *Hispanic Times Magazine* in 1998. Janet Eckles is a Spanish-language interpreter handling calls for such as hospitals, 911 emergencies, utility and insurance companies, and courts. She had a successful career as a court interpreter, did federal trials, and joined AT&T in 1991.

"The most challenging linguistic situation as an AT&T... interpreter involved a call from a computer company. She remembers the representative saying, "Now I want you to draw a diagram of the different parts we'll be discussing." Eckles had the option of disqualifying herself from the call and handing it over to a sighted person. Instead, she... listened to the intricate explanation... picture[d] the computer parts and mentally

labeled them. She very successfully finished the call...

Janet Eckles proves every day that her blindness has not kept her from helping others."

In a 2002 column called "Champions", in *Newsmagazine*, we learn of Geraldine Braak of Powell River, B.C. She led a group whose application was approved by the CRTC to establish the city's second radio station, CJMP, staffed by people with disabilities and broadcasting 90% in English and 10% in French and Salish, covering local news and issues. She also raised money for children's playground equipment.

Powell River Peak publisher, Joyce Carlson, said, "She makes up her mind about something, she comes up with a project to fix it and then she leads the community to do it... She has a real heart for others..."

Braak received the Order of B.C. in 1997 and the Order of Canada in 2000.

In February, I received the following message on a listserv:

"Blind woman reading at Columbia City Library... Margaret Willson reads from her newest book... a gripping account of her experiences as an anthropologist living in a Brazilian shantytown... creat[ing] a top-quality educational center for girls..."

From March of this year, in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*:

"Her... visit to the South American city while on her way to do post-doctoral work resulted in an international organization that now serves as a model for anti-poverty work."

Here is what bahiastreet.org says about her:

"a widely respected anthropologist... She holds a Ph.D... from the London School of Economics and has taught in Britain, Holland, Greece and the United States, as well as in Brazil... Dr. Willson published "Dance Lest We All Fall Down: A Story of Friendship, Poverty, Power and Peace"... in 2007... She received the Thomas C. Wales Award for Passionate Citizenship in 2007 and the Jefferson Award for Public Service in 2008."

Now, I have a great passion for baroque music, so you'll indulge my inclusion of the composer, John Stanley (1712-1786). Blind from age 2, he was appointed church organist before he was 12. At 14, he won another such post "in preference to a great number of candidates."

In 1734, he was made organist to the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple. One of

his students said his playing attracted musicians from all over London, including George Frederick Handel. He directed concerts, and in 1729, became the youngest person to take a B.Mus. degree at Oxford. He married, had a large circle of friends, and a successful career as a teacher and organist.

When Handel died in 1759, Stanley took over the oratorio series at Covent Garden. His six concertos op. 2 were very popular; the *Grove Dictionary* calls them "among the finest English string concertos..."

He was elected a governor of the Foundling Hospital, and directed performances of Handel's Messiah.

Stanley became Master of the King's Music in 1779. He composed a dramatic oratorio for the wedding of King George III. In 1986, it was selected for the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of York, and broadcast to the nation.

Robin Tannenbaum compiled a review of biographies and autobiographies of blind women, in which we meet the following leaders and achievers:

Fanny Crosby, born in 1820, was a poet, and possibly the first woman ever to address Congress.

Bernice Clifton, describes her canteen work during World War II; she received an honorary doctorate.

Nina Gray Pifer, born in 1907: trained as a high-school teacher, and became a teacher of children with cerebral palsy.

Dr. Eleanor Gertrude Brown, born in 1888, was a teacher of history to sighted high-school students in Ohio. She was the first blind woman to graduate from Ohio State University, and took Master's and Ph.D. degrees at Columbia.

Genevieve Caulfield, born in 1888, worked to improve mutual understanding between Asians and Americans, taught English in Japan, adopted a Japanese girl, and founded a school for the blind in Asia.

Tomi Keitlen, was managing director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, and a lecturer.

Sonora Carver, a daredevil diver, became blind while performing. She continued her successful diving career.

Collette Richard, a mountaineer and speleologist (or cave explorer) climbed Mount Blanc du Tacul in the Alps, over 13,000 feet, and explored prehistoric caves in the Pyrenees.

Canadian Gloria Sewell, nee Mortimore: a social worker, and family and marriage counsellor.

Rose Resnick, grew up in New York City in the Depression and studied for a teaching career. Denied access to the qualifying examinations, she became a professor of music.

Alicia Alonso was an acclaimed ballet dancer who became blind at 19 and was told by doctors she would never dance again. She continued her stellar dancing career, and established the Ballet Nacional de Cuba.

Charlotte Sanford ran a women's clothing store and raised three children.

Jim Sherman uses a baby monitor to keep watch on the safety of his elderly neighbour in the house next door. One evening, he heard strange noises on the baby monitor, then his neighbour frantically calling for help, that the house was on fire!

Sherman reports, "I got to the door and heard crackling, smelled smoke, and felt the intense heat." He entered the house, reached the elderly woman, and led her out to safety.

Incidentally, the elderly woman he rescued, is also blind.

So this is a dramatic example of our convention theme: the blind leading the blind!

Now, let's look briefly at politics.

Edwin Jones became blind in 1876. He opened a business, did postal work, and was a leader in his church. He became a Justice of the Peace in 1916, and was elected Mayor of Swindon in 1920.

More recently: Richard Lees, Liberal Democrat councillor for Eastgate, and Mayor of Taunton in the U.K. His wife is also blind. They have two children.

After serving as a City Councillor for five years, Randy Meyer was elected Mayor of Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, in 2004. He owns a successful financial planning business. While running for mayor, the slogan of his campaign was: "It doesn't take sight to run a community, it takes vision."

The Right Honourable David Blunkett was born in 1947 to an unprivileged family in Sheffield, England. His father was a gas board worker, killed on the job when Blunkett was 12. At school, he was reportedly told that as a blind person his options were limited. His achievements have proven that estimation to be patently ridiculous. He took an Honours degree in political theory at the University of Sheffield; entered municipal politics upon graduation; was a clerk and shop steward; and an industrial

tutor at a college of technology. From 1980 to 1987 he was leader of Sheffield City Council. In 1987, he was elected Member of Parliament, for Sheffield Brightside - Britain's third blind M.P. Mr. Blunkett rose to become a government Minister in the Cabinet of Tony Blair, and one of the Prime Minister's closest colleagues, serving as Secretary of State for Education and Employment, Home Secretary, and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Mr. Blunkett held for years some of the most powerful posts in all the public service of the United Kingdom.

By the way, those who attended the 2005 Convention of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), will remember with pleasure that Mr. Blunkett joined us at the welcome reception.

And here, today, in this room, are blind leaders of the sighted. For example:

Carla McQuillan: our guest of honour and keynote speaker. She runs several Montessori schools and provides parent-education and teacher-training in Oregon.

Oriano Belusic, CFB's past president: businessperson, property developer, and active member of service clubs and community organizations.

Larry Scharschmidt: supervisor in a large landscape grounds workers' department. With two colleagues, he supervises a staff of 42 employees.

Graeme McCreath: successful businessperson and health care professional, runs his own physiotherapy clinic.

Professor Paul Gabias, Ph.D., LL.D.: Hundreds of inquiring minds come to learn from Dr. Gabias's knowledge and expertise in psychology.

And our distinguished friends Dr. Fikru Gebrekidan and Dr. Abebe Teklu.

That makes three blind Ph.D.s in this room! Two of them professors.

I ask you: Is there anything absurd or surprising about a blind leader of the sighted? No! There demonstrably is not! And the sighted better get used to it. Because in the Federation, blind Canadians know exactly where they're going. Their destination - your destination - is equality, opportunity, and leadership!

I leave you with the words of Kirk Adams, from his article "Don't Shortchange the Blind", in the *Seattle Times*, last month:

"One day, the conversation... around the dinner table will not be whether a woman or an African American is qualified to be president, but if a blind person is capable of holding the highest office in [the] land. And the answer, just like the answer to our present day's question, will be a resounding Yes!"

A Salute to Starbucks!

By Doris Belusic

We love our coffee like everyone else does who lines up for their favourite latte, cappuccino or Americano. But, there's another good reason to appreciate Starbucks. Starbucks has taken the initiative, taken blind people into account, and put Braille on their gift cards and other items!

"I just got one (a card) as a gift and, wow, it was pretty cool to open it and know what it is," says Michelle Creedy of Chilliwack, B.C.

"I have a lot of cards in my wallet and I love being able to pick out the Starbucks one quickly by just reading it," says Jen Goulden of Ottawa.

"I used to work for Starbucks!" says Ashley Charlton of Nanaimo, B.C. "They carry Braille menus on site in all of their corporate cafes...I also thought it was amazing that District management and up carry Braille business cards!"

Mary Ellen Gabias of Kelowna, B.C. adds, "You can also get a free Starbucks menu in Braille from National Braille Press. It doesn't include prices, just selections."

Way to go Starbucks! Now, let's see other corporations and businesses follow suit!

Recipes!

Chicken Spinach Manicotti

This recipe is from Elizabeth Lalonde and Heidi Propp, Victoria, B.C. This is a recipe they made during a cooking mentoring session.

2 cups fresh spinach, chopped
2 cups cooked chicken, chopped or shredded
1/2 cup mozzarella cheese
15 manicotti shells
3 Tbsp. butter
3 Tbsp. flour
1 cup chicken broth
2 large cans (15 oz. each) tomato sauce
3/4 cup milk or half and half
1 tsp. garlic powder
2 tsp. Italian seasoning
1 tsp. brown sugar (white sugar can be used)
1 cup mozzarella cheese
1/4 cup parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Mix together 2 cups chopped spinach, 2 cups cooked shredded chicken, and 1/2 cup mozzarella cheese. Stuff mixture into 15 manicotti shells. Set aside.

In a large saucepan over medium heat, melt 3 Tbsp. butter. Whisk in 3 Tbsp. flour. Continue whisking until smooth. Add 1 cup chicken broth. Add in 3/4 cup milk/cream and stir until smooth. Stir in 2 cans tomato sauce. Add 1 tsp. garlic powder. Add 2 tsp. Italian seasoning. Add 1 tsp. brown sugar. Stir until well combined and thickened. Grease a 9x13 baking dish. Pour about 1/2 cup of the sauce into the bottom of the dish. Put the stuffed manicotti shells in your dish. Pour the sauce over the manicotti shells until all the shells are generously covered. (You'll have some sauce leftover which you can refrigerate and use to make spaghetti the next day! It also makes a great dip for breadsticks.)

Bake your dish, covered with foil or lid, at 350* for 35 minutes. Remove from oven and top with 1 cup mozzarella cheese and 1/4 cup parmesan cheese. Bake uncovered for an additional 10 minutes, or until cheese is melted and bubbly. Remove from oven and let stand 5 minutes before serving. Enjoy!

Honey and Lime Roast Chicken

This recipe is also from Elizabeth Lalonde and Heidi Propp, Victoria, B.C. It is another recipe from one of their cooking mentoring sessions.

1 chicken
1 onion, quartered
3 garlic cloves, peeled
1 lime, quartered

1/2 lime, juice of
1 teaspoon paprika
2 tablespoons honey
1 tablespoon olive oil
salt and pepper, to taste

Prep Time: 15 mins

Total Time: 15 mins

Preheat your oven to 400°F.

Rinse your chicken well, inside and out and dry thoroughly with a paper towel.

Stuff the cavity with the quartered lime, onion and the garlic.

Rub the olive oil all over the chicken and season with salt and pepper.

Place the chicken in a roasting tin and place in the middle of preheated oven.

Roasting time depends on size of chicken. Roast 20 minutes per pound plus an extra 20 minutes (for example: 4 lb chicken: $4 \times 20 + 20 = 1 \text{ hour } 40 \text{ minutes}$).

Using the juices from the roasting tin, baste the chicken every 30 mins to stop it from drying out.

While the chicken is roasting, mix the lime juice, honey and paprika in a small bowl. 10 - 30 minutes before your chicken is done, take it out of the oven and brush with the lime and honey glaze.

Return to the oven to finish roasting.

At the end of the roasting time, make sure all juices run clear by inserting a skewer into the thickest part of the thigh.

Jollygood Lemon Squares

This recipe is from Christine McCreath, wife of CFB member Graeme McCreath, Victoria, B.C. This is a really good and light dessert if using light ingredients. A perfect ending to a meal.

1 pkg (3 oz.) lemon-flavoured Jello powder
1 cup boiling water

1-1/2 cups crushed, low-fat graham crackers
3 tbsp light butter or margarine, melted
1 tbsp packed brown sugar

8 oz light cream cheese (250 gr brick)
1 cup sugar
2 Tbsp lemon juice
2 tsp grated lemon zest
1 tsp vanilla

4 cups light frozen whipped topping (1 large tub Cool Whip), thawed

(Day before making: take Cool Whip from freezer and place in fridge to thaw.)

In a small bowl, dissolve Jello powder in boiling water. Refrigerate until slightly thickened, but not set (about 45 - 60 minutes).

Meanwhile, prepare crust. In a small bowl, combine graham crumbs, melted butter, and brown sugar. Stir well using a fork. Grease a 9 x 13-inch baking pan. Press crumb mixture evenly over bottom of pan. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate while you make filling.

To prepare filling, beat together cream cheese, sugar, lemon juice, lemon zest, and vanilla on high speed of electric mixer. Beat until smooth. Add thickened Jello and beat on medium speed until well blended. Fold in whipped topping.

Pour lemon mixture over prepared crust and spread evenly to edges of pan. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 4 hours, until set. Cut into squares and serve.

Easter Basket Cake

This recipe is from Maria Kovacs in Maple Ridge, B.C. She makes this cake and says it's easy. Although Easter is over for this year, it never hurts to have a good recipe. With different decorations, this cake would be nice for other occasions too.

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups sugar
1 tsp baking powder
1 tsp baking soda
1/2 tsp salt
6 medium or 3 cups carrots, shredded
2/3 cup butter, softened
1/2 cup sour cream
4 eggs

Frosting:

1/4 cup all -purpose flour
1 cup milk
1 cup butter, softened
1 1/4 cups powdered sugar
1/2 tsp almond extract
1 cup flaked coconut
Green food colouring
Jelly beans

Oven Temp ~ 350 degrees
Baking Time ~ 25 - 30 minutes
Pan Type ~ two 9-inch round cake pans

Preheat the oven. Grease and flour cake pans.

Combine 2 cups flour, the sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt in large bowl. Add the carrots, 2/3 cup butter, sour cream and eggs. Beat at medium speed, scraping bowl often until well mixed.

Pour batter into prepared pans. Bake until toothpick inserted in centre comes out clean. Cool for 10 minutes, then remove from pans. Cool completely.

Stir together 1/4 cup flour and the milk, in 1-quart saucepan until dissolved. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly until thickened (4 to 5 minutes). Cool completely.

Combine 1 cup butter, powdered sugar and almond extract in a small bowl. Beat at medium speed, scraping bowl often, until creamy. Add cooled flour mixture. Continue beating until fluffy.

Place 1 cake layer on serving platter. Spread with 3/4 cup frosting. Place second layer on top of frosted layer. Frost top and sides of cake.

Sprinkle top and sides of cake with 3/4 cup flaked coconut. Tint remaining coconut with green food color. Form nest on top of cake with the green coconut. Before serving, fill nest with jelly beans.

Recipe Yields: 16 servings

Banana Oatmeal Cookies

This recipe is from Doris Belusic, Victoria, B.C. It is a great recipe for using up over-ripe bananas.

In a small bowl, sift together dry ingredients:

1 1/2 c flour (I use 1 c whole wheat & 1/2 c white)

1 tsp salt

1/2 tsp baking soda

1 tsp cinnamon

In a large bowl, mix together wet ingredients:

1 c brown sugar

3/4 c canola oil

1 c mashed banana

1 3/4 c oats (I use Rogers large flake)

1/2 c chopped walnuts

Mix dry ingredients into wet.

Drop by large Tablespoonful on parchment-lined baking sheet. Bake at 350 degrees for 17 minutes or so.

For me, this made 18 large cookies.



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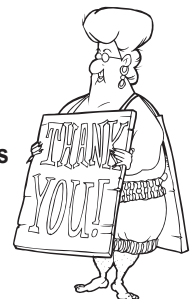
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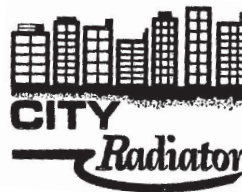
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