

The Blind Canadian

A publication of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)

In This Issue:

■ A Canadian's Experience at a Blindness Skills Training Centre in the US

■ Blind Adults Share Their Experiences Finding Employment

■ Report from the CFB 2012 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 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.



*Committed to the
equality of blind Canadians*

CFB The Blind Canadian

A publication of the Canadian Federation of the Blind

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

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

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

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

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

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The Federation in Your Journey: The Courage to Try ***By Mary Ellen Gabias***

Journeys make me think about travel and moving around. The notion of travelling represents a metaphor for how I live my life and what the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) mean to me.

Over the years, I have discovered that the stories I tell myself about what has happened to me, shape my destiny more than the happenings themselves.

First Paradigm: Don't move.

When I was five, a buddy knocked on my door and asked me if I could go outside and play cops and robbers. My mom said yes, but she asked me to stay in the backyard. "Don't go near the side yard. Workers are repairing the septic tank," mom said.

If I had listened to my mom that day, I wouldn't be telling this story now. All I can say in defense of my five-year-old self is that, when Elliot Ness was in hot pursuit of Al Capone, he probably didn't remember everything his mother told him either. I will spare you the details, except that when I was running full speed ahead and, suddenly, there was no ground underneath me, it felt like I was flying - until gravity won. My mother stated the lesson from that event simply: "You pay a price when you don't pay attention." How grateful I am that was her message. It so easily could have been "Don't run; it's too dangerous."

My parents encouraged me to move on my own, but unfortunately, other people, and several circumstances, did not. My brothers usually parked their bikes in the wrong places; it is amazing how many bruises one can get from falling over a bicycle. Many people said, "Don't worry; I'll do it; you might fall; just sit there." So the idea that moving was scary entered my consciousness.

A long white cane would have made things easier for me, but my parents told themselves a story that, along with a tin cup and a handful of pencils, the cane was part of the beggar's badge. So, I became afraid to move, because I lacked that tool.

Second Paradigm: Exploring is fun.

In grade two, I learned about explorers: Christopher Columbus, Magellan - those brave people who went out and discovered new continents.

Our school's acreage was relatively small, but it felt enormous. I set out to explore every inch of it - charting unknown territories. Without a cane to check out the ground ahead of me, my explorations were more arduous than they needed to be. Even so, I began to believe that life was fun; getting around was an adventure. Then, home to mom's cupcakes - no starving in the wilderness! So, the idea that exploring was a joy became part of my life.

Third Paradigm: Am I good enough?

I heard the family of another blind student talking about "cane travel." They said of their

child, "He moves as fast as a sighted person." I wanted that. I begged for cane travel lessons and insisted that my parents change their story about what it meant to use a white cane.

I was instructed by an orientation and mobility specialist, trained in Boston. She called herself a "peripetologist" - a pretentious and intentionally manufactured Greek word, meaning the science of getting around. I learned the two-point touch, three-point touch, touch-and-slide, touch-and-drag. I learned to go with a sighted person the first time I went anywhere, to make sure the new route was safe.

The 3rd paradigm became: "Am I doing it right? Am I a good traveller or a bad one?"

All of these paradigms existed simultaneously.

Sometimes I was scared to move, sometimes I was excited, and sometimes I wondered if I was good enough. Then I became involved with the National Federation of the Blind - a growing, changing and dynamic organization in the U.S. My first trip to a Federation convention, where hundreds of blind people gathered together, helped me better understand my paradigms, and changed the stories I told myself.

At convention, in 1972, far too many people still believed that "independent" travel meant that not everyone had his or her own sighted guide; independence meant that one guide worked with five or six people. Groups of us travelled by "train" - not Amtrak or VIA Rail, but a "train" where the sighted person guided five or six blind people who hung on for dear life. Heaven help you if the "trains" got tangled up. The sighted people would get into arguments about who had the right of way and which "train" should move. The blind people stood patiently waiting, while the sighted settled the matter.

I also encountered a new and exciting spirit at that convention. Canes tapped, people walked by themselves with their heads high, with speed, with joy. Sometimes one person linked arms with a less confident colleague, or sweethearts held hands. I deliberately followed those confident travellers around the hotel and the downtown Chicago streets, and imitated everything they did. I added yet another paradigm to my list.

Fourth Paradigm: "Of course, I travel; I've got places to go, and I'm going to get there." Blind people live with all of these paradigms of travel and life. Yes, sometimes moving seems too dangerous; sometimes it is an adventure to explore and try new things; sometimes self-doubt stops us from trying at all. But, more and more, because of the Canadian Federation of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind, blind people travel because they have got places to go. The techniques are the same; the stories are different.

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Mary Ellen Gabias at the CFB Convention in May 2012.

Photo by Rachel Moore

Federation conventions change your life. You cannot imagine, until you go, the many empowering stories you will hear, and how these stories will change your life and the lives of others, in so many subtle ways.

That day, when I was playing cops and robbers, if my mother had said, “Don’t move, it’s too dangerous,” my plunge into the septic tank would not have just been a humorous story, it would have ended my desire to move and dream on my own. I would have become afraid that independent action would lead me into the mire, instead of learning that when you pay attention, you don’t have to pay a price. I am grateful to my parents and to everyone in the Federation for helping me understand those lessons, for teaching me the way, and for sharing my journey.

***President’s Report ~ By Elizabeth Lalonde
(Presented at the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) convention,
‘The Journey,’ 2012)***

Each one of us, blind and sighted, is on a journey. Each one of us takes steps in this journey according to our own life circumstances. Blind people and sighted people journey towards independence, employment, personal growth, achievement, a sense of family and community, a feeling of kinship and connection with others.

Sometimes people make great strides towards their destination; sometimes they step back, take a breath, and journey on again. But, ultimately, everyone continues towards their goals.

“You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb.” - Sir Winston Churchill.

I just returned from a trip to Baltimore, Maryland. Baltimore is known for many things: like the Orioles, snow-cone stands and all-you-can-eat crab feasts. But, it is also the headquarters of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) - sister organization to the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) - where much of the Federation business takes place.

While I was in Baltimore, I visited the NFB’s national headquarters. I also spent time at a local training centre, called Blind Industries and Services of Maryland (BISM) and gave a seminar about blind Canadians and the journey of empowerment.

At the seminar, I read a story I wrote about growing up as a blind child in the regular school system. As blind people, I believe we are on two journeys. The first is our own individual journey. The second is the group journey of the blindness movement.



*President’s Report by:
Elizabeth Lalonde*

A significant historical book exists about the blindness civil rights movement in the United States, an account of the years since the National Federation of the Blind was founded in 1940; this book is called 'Walking Alone and Marching Together' - 'walking alone,' being the individual journey; 'marching together,' the group journey. Convention comprises both of these journeys. The individual journey as a blind person, which is diverse -- as different as people are different - but, remarkably similar, too and the journey of blind people as a movement, the journey blind people travel on together. Through the movement, members find the power to encourage, to mentor, to support each other on their journeys towards independence, towards accomplishment, towards equality. The Canadian Federation of the Blind embodies this group journey.

Highlights of the Canadian Federation of the Blind's recent and ongoing activities.

Blind Youth Leadership and Mentoring

In 2010, the Canadian Federation of the Blind was fortunate to receive a grant from Coast Capital Savings, for its Blind Youth Leadership and Mentoring Program. This program matched blind youth with competent blind role models for one-on-one mentoring; ran a series of teleconference seminars on blindness topics, such as life beyond school, jobs, and the importance of good cane and Braille skills; and organized gatherings where blind people met to have fun, to socialize and share experiences. The program built a network of support and friends in the Federation, and helped participants feel connected and part of a greater community of blind people.

'The Eyes of Me'

On the evening of December 1, 2010, members held a screening of the documentary film, 'The Eyes of Me' at the Metro Studio Theatre, in Victoria, B.C. 'The Eyes of Me' explored the lives of four blind teenagers, attending the Texas School for the Blind. The film provided an excellent forum for public education and public discussion about the issues faced by blind youth.

'Sky's The Limit' Concert

On May 6, 2011, the Canadian Federation of the Blind put on its first-ever concert. 'Sky's The Limit' was a combination, public education and fundraising event. CFB members and supporters performed music, helped with attendance and concessions, raised funds and raised awareness.

'Find Your Freedom: Discover the Long White Cane'

On May 7, 2011, Denise Mackenstadt, an internationally recognized leader in the field of teaching blind people to travel independently using the long white cane, ran a workshop that combined education on the principles of 'structured discovery.' This is a method of independent travel that uses problem-solving strategies with guided experience.

NFB Convention in Orlando

In July, 2011, several members took part in the annual convention of the National

Federation of the Blind held in Orlando, Florida. The convention is a week-long gathering of thousands of blind people from around the world, of all ages and backgrounds, who meet to learn, mentor and empower one another, in a positive atmosphere.

Members participated in more than a hundred meetings and workshops related to vocational, cultural and recreational topics, and gained more skills in providing mentorship.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind hosted a Canada table at the large exhibit hall, distributed information about the organization and sold some delicious maple sugar candy.

Super Trivia Night

On March 31, 2012, the Canadian Federation of the Blind held a Super Trivia Night. This event raised in excess of \$1,700 and was a lot of fun.

Children's Books

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is sponsoring five children's books, which by the end of the year, will be available in downloadable Braille text versions.

The 'Blind Canadian' magazine

This year, the Canadian Federation of the Blind will publish two issues of its magazine, the 'Blind Canadian.' This positive and informative publication educates members of the public about the abilities of blind people and the issues blind people face.

Other Outreach

The Canadian Federation of the Blind continues with its on-going outreach activities, including its website www.cfb.ca, the Blindsight Blog, and an active electronic mailing list.

Human Rights

Members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind remain dedicated to their work to improve human rights for blind citizens.

The organization has been involved in a number of human rights issues, ranging from BC Transit, to library issues, to accessible touch screen technology.

Rally for Change and Choice

One of the most exciting and significant of its activities was the 'Rally for Change and Choice' we organized in February 2011. Over 40 people, from across the province, joined together on the legislative grounds in Victoria, B.C., to tell government and the public that blind people matter, that blind people must be heard, that blind people will no longer wait in silence and in isolation.

A 75 per cent unemployment rate is far too high; an absence of intensive blindness

skills training in this country is appalling; the lack of public funding and public accountability for rehabilitation and training of blind people is a disgrace.

The rally was an historic event for blind Canadians. For the first time, blind Canadians organized to speak for themselves, without an intermediary speaking on their behalf. The message was loud and clear: “We want change. We want choice. We want government to heed our voice.”

I believe one of the most important accomplishments in the Canadian Federation of the Blind is its membership.

I am proud to know and work with such strong, dedicated and hardworking people. The executive, members and supporters work tirelessly to do the work of the Federation in Canada.

Because of these people, the Canadian Federation of the Blind is a strong, vibrant and dynamic force of positive change for the blind in this country.

I will now read to you some testimonials from people who have benefited from Federation mentoring and group connection. These words, the words of members tell the most powerful and profound story of all.

From a speech given by Shane Baker at the Canadian Federation of the Blind ‘Moving Forward’ Convention, 2007, in Victoria, B.C.:

“At first, I went to a few CFB meetings, and what I found was a group of people who had passion, fire, and who believed strongly in what they were talking about. It was that level of people coming together. I wanted to be with these people, to hear these intelligent, these strong people. I said, “Hey, this is for me.”

It was one in the morning when we first stepped in the door of the hotel in Dallas, Texas; it was something special. I heard chimes ringing from a clock, and people laughing. People welcomed me, knowing it was my first convention. The confidence that emanated from these people was something to be proud of. Over the next few days, I would be lying if I said it wasn’t overwhelming. It brought back emotions of loss and grief. But, with the help of my mother and people from the CFB, I was able to face my fears. Now, I know this cane I am holding is something to be proud of. I’m not worried about being blind anymore.

Every time I went to a session at the convention, there was that passion, the passion I had lost when I lost my sight. A friend I met there told me that, if I learned the skills of blindness, blindness would become a nuisance, not a nightmare. Now take a moment to think about that - because, that is what blindness was to me – a nightmare. During that week, I was able to say to myself, “You know, you can dream.” I have so much potential, and now I won’t let myself be limited by my lack of sight.

From a speech given by Nancy Gill at the CFB 'Moving Forward' Convention, 2007, in Victoria, B.C.:

"I have been legally blind for 17 years. I knew I needed help. I knew I needed support. I was afraid to leave home. I wanted to meet other people who were blind. I was afraid to use my cane. I was afraid to show people I was blind. But, a call to CFB and talking to the people helped me to be strong. I raised money to help me go to the convention in Dallas. I was so happy. I learned a lot. A few months after the convention, I went mountain climbing in Peru. I had to keep climbing. I couldn't look back. I had to keep going up. Now, I know a blind person can do it, a blind person can climb a mountain."

From the 'Blind Canadian', Volume 1, March 2003, titled, 'U.S. National Federation of the Blind Convention,' by Doris Belusic:

"For anyone unfamiliar with National Federation of the Blind conventions, they are life-changing experiences. I feel fortunate to have attended three of these conventions, along with my husband. Each time, we returned home full of inspiration and knowledge that became integral to our daily lives. The convention is an annual, week-long gathering of thousands of blind people from around the world, of all ages and backgrounds. These people come together in a positive atmosphere to celebrate the personal and collective achievements of people who are blind.

The convention sports a hubbub of activity. People meet old friends and make new ones. They share ideas and learn new skills. They do all this in a busy and stimulating environment, where blind people aren't ashamed to use their white canes and guide dogs, where they are proud of their accomplishments.

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) convention provides an important educational and inspirational experience. It represents the culmination of our philosophy. It is where we witness blind people at their best. We learn blindness is a characteristic, not a handicap. We learn that with training and opportunity, blind people can compete on terms of equality with sighted peers. We learn the problem of blindness is not the lack of eyesight, but the lack of positive information about blindness and the achievements of blind people. We learn it is respectable to be blind. We learn to speak for ourselves. We see that the traditional concept of blindness is changing and we become free of old, negative attitudes."

Over the last few years, the Canadian Federation of the Blind has hosted four conventions: 'Believe,' 2005; 'Moving Forward,' 2007; 'The Blind Leading the Blind,' 2008; 'Louis Braille: From Literacy to Liberty,' 2009.

Now, I welcome you to our fifth convention. I welcome you to 'The Journey,' 2012.

This is a powerful time. When you leave today, take the energy with you. Let it stimulate, and invigorate, refresh, and open your mind to the possibilities awaiting you

in this life, and, as you travel on your own journey of life, please take time to help the blindness movement on its journey. Whether you support a friend to learn to cook, to get out for social events, to use a white cane, to learn Braille, to be OK about being blind, or whether you take on a human rights project or go to a local school to raise awareness about the abilities of blind people, you are making a difference, on a group level.

Thank you for your spirit. Thank you for your work. Thank you for being with us.

***Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)
Convention 2012 'The Journey' Report
By Doris Belusic***

From the Canadian Federation of the Blind 2012 convention agenda:

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

*Lao-tzu, The Way of Lao-tzu,
Chinese philosopher (604 BC - 531 BC)*

"The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) have come together to share in a journey, a journey to empower one another, to raise awareness about the unlimited potential of blind people, and together change what it means to be blind."

*"Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."
- Helen Keller*

The Canadian Federation of the Blind held its fifth convention, 'The Journey,' in Victoria, BC, at the Capital City Center Hotel, on May 11 – 13, 2012.

Close to 50 participants attended and shared in this important event that brings blind people together from across distances to empower and learn from each other. Federation conventions provide one of the best ways for blind people to learn about the potential, capabilities, accomplishments, advocacy, high expectations, positive attitudes, confidence and independence of blind people; and to truly know that it is respectable and OK to be blind. Conventions also give blind people an opportunity to experience what it is like to be in the majority.

Special Guest

Members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind were honoured to welcome special guest and keynote speaker, Mike Freeman, and his wife, Connie, to the convention. Mr. Freeman is a board member of the National Federation of the Blind in the United States, the largest and most influential movement of the organized blind in the world. A resident of Washington State, Mr. Freeman is also president of the Washington affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind. Mr. Freeman is a leader among blind people,

and shows through his words and actions the capabilities and potential of the blind community.

Blind Youth

The convention this year attracted an impressive number of blind youth, who are future leaders of the organization. These young people spoke, showed their talents and participated fully in the weekend's activities.

Several of the youth presented on Saturday's employment panel, and actively demonstrated a desire and hunger to find gainful employment for themselves.

Thanks to a grant from Coast Capital Savings, the Canadian Federation of the Blind sponsored youth to attend the convention through its Blindness Youth Mentoring Program, and with a generous donation from the Victoria Imperial Lions Club, the Federation also assisted with their transportation costs.

Highlights of Convention:

EBay Seminar

On Friday morning, May 11, Mary Ellen Gabias, National and International Employment Advisor for the Blind, ran a workshop on the benefits and challenges of selling on EBay as a blind person. Federation members, Oriano Belusic and Heidi Propp, demonstrated the process of listing an item for sale on EBay, using a talking computer.

Adaptive Technology and Resource Exhibit

On Friday afternoon, the Federation hosted an Adaptive Technology and Blindness Resource Exhibit, which featured vendors, such as HumanWare, AbleTech and Personal Communications Systems. Convention attendees tried portable refreshable Braille displays, PDAs, magnifying devices, a Mac running Apple's screen reader, VoiceOver, and other fun electronic gadgets. Attendees also checked out long white Federation-style canes, which they kept, free of charge; browsed blindness literature; and learned about Braille.

Welcome Reception

At the Friday evening reception, members met and enjoyed the company of other blind attendees, old friends and new, many from out of town. BC Saanich South MLA, Lana Popham, attended and spoke about the importance of choice in one's rehabilitation options and the urgent need for government-funded intensive blindness-skills training in the province.



*Attendees at the CFB Convention in May 2012.
Photo by: Harold Tritthardt*

'Rowdy and Raucous' Auction

Later that evening, members held a 'Rowdy and Raucous' auction and sold a variety of donated items to raise money for the organization. West Coast smoked scallops, a specially-made quilted table runner, and treats baked by blind members were some of the items that enticed bidders.

Dean Yano, the Western Canada representative from HumanWare, generously donated a Victor Stream digital recorder, which claimed the top bid of the evening.

Saturday's Conference

The conference took place the following day, Saturday, May 12.

Canadian Federation of the Blind president, Elizabeth Lalonde, and National Federation of the Blind of Washington president, Mike Freeman, welcomed conference attendees at the opening ceremonies, and blind musician, Karl-Erik Sonvisen, performed an electric guitar rendition of 'Oh Canada.'

Throughout the day, members and guests gave informative and inspirational speeches on a variety of blindness-related topics, such as the long white cane, Braille literacy, independence, rehabilitation, employment, expectations, empowerment, sports and

recreation, advocacy, the Federation, and a positive perspective on blindness and the abilities of blind people.

Specific presentations included: perspectives from blind adults about their post-secondary and employment experiences; speeches from people who have attended intensive blindness skills training centres in the U.S.; information on the latest adaptive talking and Braille technologies; an update about library services for the blind; a talk from a blind author on his new book, 'The Politics of Blindness: From Charity to Parity'; a panel discussion of human rights cases related to blind Canadians, such as the case of accessible electronic textbooks; a presentation about 'Blind Beginnings,' a nonprofit for blind children and their families; a live interview with members about their experiences losing their sight and learning nonvisual skills; the story of a blind Spanish teacher and new citizen to Canada; the adventures of a blind marathon runner, and that of a blind skier and biathlon competitor; and a goalball athlete. (Note: Goalball is a team sport, designed for blind athletes, in which participants use a heavy ball with bells inside. It is a fast-paced game and is a Paralympic sport.)

Banquet

Following the conference, members and guests visited, reminisced and enjoyed their meals at the banquet dinner. Keynote speaker, Mike Freeman, topped the evening with his banquet address titled, 'The Patterns of Blindness.'

Talent Night

Later at the talent night, blind performers played guitar and piano, sang and rapped, told jokes and recited original poetry.

Annual General Meeting

On Sunday morning, May 13, the Canadian Federation of the Blind held its Annual General Meeting.

Elizabeth Lalonde, the organization's president for nearly a decade, stepped down from her position to pursue other goals related to the empowerment of blind Canadians. Members thanked Elizabeth for her dedication, time and accomplishments during her presidency. A new board was elected. (See the following article to learn more about the new board of the Canadian Federation of the Blind.)

Mike Freeman put out an invitation for everyone to attend the National Federation of the Blind of Washington State Convention, which will be held October 19 – 21, 2012, in Vancouver, Washington.

Thank You to Convention Sponsors

The Canadian Federation of the Blind wishes to thank the sponsors of its 2012 convention, including: the Victoria Imperial Lions Club; Coast Capital Savings; Capital City Center Hotel; HumanWare; AbleTech; Personal Communications Systems; and the National Federation of the Blind.

The Federation would also like to thank its volunteers and those who attended and made the convention such a success.

Canadian Federation of the Blind Elects New Executive Board

After a successful convention this month, the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) elected a new executive board at its annual general meeting on May 13, 2012 in Victoria, BC. All members of the executive are blind and serve without compensation.

Members elected Mary Ellen Gabias as their new president. Mary Ellen is a founding member of the organization and has worked tirelessly to spread the group's positive message about blindness.

"I am excited about taking on this position. When provided with adequate training and given opportunity, blind people can and do compete on terms of equality with the sighted," explained Gabias.

One of the new president's top priorities is to convince government that paying for blindness skills training and giving blind people a choice of where to obtain this training is cost effective. "Unfortunately, adequate training is not available in British Columbia because government has abdicated its responsibility to make sure blind individuals have options," says Gabias.

On another important matter, Gabias says she is encouraged by the continuing efforts of the public library system to develop truly inclusive library services for blind patrons and says the organization will continue to support that effort.

Elizabeth Lalonde stepped down from the president's position after a decade of service, so she could pursue other important projects relevant to blind Canadians. "I am not stepping down; I am stepping forward. My goal over the next few years is to work towards improving blindness skills training and employment for blind people," says Lalonde.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind wishes to welcome other new executive members including: Gail Copp, first vice-president; Graeme McCreath, treasurer; and Heidi Propp, member at large, and is grateful to Dr. Paul Gabias, second vice-president, and Doris Belusic, secretary for their continued hard work and service.

The Federation also wishes to thank outgoing executive members Oriano Belusic, Larry Scharschmidt and Erin Lacharity, for their dedication and commitment over the years.

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

Executive Members of the CFB

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

Before immigrating to Canada, she served as Assistant Director of the Job Opportunities for the Blind project of the National Federation of the Blind in the United States where she created and taught a career information curriculum to more than two thousand program participants. Since coming to Canada in 1989, Ms. Gabias has served as the editor for a national magazine for blind people and is a co-founder of the Canadian Federation of the Blind.

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

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

Doris Belusic, secretary, is a founding member of the CFB and has served as secretary for almost 10 years. She has been editor and is currently assistant editor of a blindness magazine and writes extensively on blindness issues. She has worked for 30 years at the Royal Jubilee Hospital in Victoria, and more recently has been co-contractor with her husband in building houses.

Graeme McCreath, treasurer, was born in Liverpool, England where he attended a school for the blind and attended a Physiotherapy training program in London,

specifically designed for blind students. After immigrating to Canada, Mr. McCreath worked at the Victoria General Hospital for several years before opening his own physiotherapy practice in Victoria. He is the author of the book, "The Politics of Blindness."

Elizabeth Lalonde, past-president, has extensive personal and professional experience in the field of blindness. Ms. Lalonde recently completed a nine-month intensive blindness immersion training program at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. After earning a BA with a double major in journalism and anthropology from the University of Victoria, she worked as a communications co-ordinator for the Province of British Columbia and served as president of the CFB from 2002 to 2012.

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

Federationism Celebrates 20 Years in Canada ***By Doris Belusic***

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), a grassroots, civil rights movement of blind people, is flourishing in our country. But, only 20 years ago, in Canada, few people knew about the Federation and its empowering message of equality, opportunity, and positive perspective of blindness and the abilities of blind people.

Thinking Back

Though the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), the largest movement of organized blind people in the world – 50,000 members – had existed since 1940, south of the Canadian border in the United States, for Canadians, Federationism was a new concept.

Past president, Elizabeth Lalonde, in her 2005 convention speech, 'Putting It Into Context. What is the Canadian Federation of the Blind? Why Are We Here? And What Do We Want for Blind Canadians?' asked: "How could such a large and influential and positive organization exist on the same continent for over 50 years, without my knowledge?"

In 1992, Dr Paul Gabias and Mary Ellen Gabias founded the Federation in Canada; it has evolved over the last two decades and is now a thriving and vital force in this country.

In Volume 3 of the 'Blind Canadian' magazine, Elizabeth Lalonde explains the core of the movement in her president's message titled, 'The Feeling of Federationism:'

“Blindness is a characteristic. It’s respectable to be blind. With proper training, opportunity and a positive attitude, blind people can compete on terms of equality with the sighted. The real problem of blindness is not the lack of eyesight, but the lack of positive information about blindness and the abilities of blind people.”

In her message, Elizabeth says, “these statements represent the philosophy of the Canadian Federation of the Blind and explain the core beliefs of Federationists; they provide focus, direction and purpose to our movement, but they only describe part of who we are as Federationists. The other essential quality of the Federation exists beyond statements and beyond words; it dwells in the realm of feeling – the feeling one experiences when attending a Federation gathering, the feeling of camaraderie, of belief in a common goal, of working together with other blind people who feel good about who they are and who they are becoming.”

The Canadian Federation of the Blind brings a new understanding of blindness to Canada – one that views blindness with a positive perspective, recognizes blind people’s abilities and accomplishments, and says it’s OK to be blind.

Accomplishments of the Last 20 Years

The Long White Cane:

The Canadian Federation of the Blind introduced the Federation-style long white cane to Canada, and the notion of ‘structured discovery,’ a method of independent travel used by blind people that emphasizes problem-solving and self-initiated travel.

The organization provides long white canes to blind Canadians free of charge through its ‘Walking Proud’ program; holds white cane walks, where blind people gather to go for walks together to increase independence; and has adopted October 15 as the Canadian Federation of the Blind White Cane Day.

Blindness Skills Training:

The Canadian Federation of the Blind introduced the concept of individual choice in rehabilitation options, and advocates strongly for government-funded, accountable intensive blindness skills rehabilitation training for blind Canadians.

Currently, this kind of positive intensive training is available at three U.S. world-renowned centres (The Colorado Center for the Blind, in Littleton, Colorado; the Louisiana Center for the Blind, in Ruston, Louisiana; and BLIND Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota.)

In 2010, Elizabeth Lalonde, past president of the Canadian Federation of the Blind, attended the Louisiana Center for the Blind for nine months. She wrote a blog about

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*Dr Paul Gabias & Mary Ellen Gabias, founders of the CFB.
Photo by: Joanne Gabias*

her journey while at the centre, and other blind Canadians lived vicariously through her experiences.

Conventions:

The organization introduced National Federation of the Blind (NFB) conventions to Canadians. These events bring up to 3,000 blind people together from all over the world to teach and learn and empower each other. In 1997, Dr Paul Gabias and Mary Ellen Gabias raised funds to take a ninety-person Canadian contingent to the New Orleans convention. Since then, through the support of the Canadian Federation of the Blind, many Canadians have attended these conventions and have gained tremendous skills, knowledge and inspiration from their experiences.

As a group, members have attended NFB - Washington State conventions, and the Canadian Federation of the Blind has held five successful conventions in Victoria, British Columbia: 'Believe' 2005; 'Moving Forward' 2007; 'The Blind Leading the Blind' 2008; 'Louis Braille: From Literacy to Liberty' 2009, which celebrated the 200th Anniversary of Louis Braille's birth, the inventor of Braille; and our most recent convention, 'The Journey' 2012.

At its 2007 convention, members were honoured to host Dr Marc Maurer, president of the NFB, and his wife, Patricia Maurer. At our 2005 and 2008 conventions, we were honoured to host Carla McQuillan, previous NFB national board member and a past president of NFB of Oregon. This year we were honoured to host Mike Freeman, president of the NFB of Washington State and a NFB national board member, and his wife, Connie Freeman.

Advocacy:

The Canadian Federation of the Blind has accomplished much advocacy work over the years. Members have attended government meetings; written hundreds of letters to ministers, MLAs and MPs, as well as to businesses and newspapers, and conducted interviews with the press.

Advocacy issues ranged from BC Transit inaccessibility; library services; quiet hybrid electric cars; and website inaccessibility; to protests against the damaging portrayal of blind people in the movie, 'Blindness'; and condemnation of CNIB's negative TV ad campaigns.

In 2009, as recorded in the Hansard, a group of Canadian Federation of the Blind members attended the BC Legislature, with Saanich South MLA, Lana Popham, who addressed the need for intensive rehabilitation for the blind.

In 2011, members organized a 'Rally for Change' and demonstrated, alongside other blind British Columbians, at the BC Legislature, to tell government and the public that blind people urgently need intensive blindness skills training and employment opportunities.

Braille:

The Canadian Federation of the Blind strongly advocates for the importance of Braille as literacy for blind people. In 2009, the organization celebrated Louis Braille's 200th anniversary of his birth with its 'Louis Braille: From Literacy to Liberty' convention, and we dedicated a 'Blind Canadian' magazine edition to celebrate the value of Braille.

In 2006 and 2007, members visited Victoria schools to present the 'Braille is Beautiful' program, which gave students an opportunity to try reading and writing Braille and learn about the abilities of blind people.

Community Outreach and Education:

The Federation has held philosophy sessions, socials, Christmas dinners, outreach visits and regular monthly meetings.

Members have provided blindness information to blind people and to the public through various means, such as community information tables, presentations, the website and a popular electronic mailing list.

In 2011, the Canadian Federation of the Blind teamed with Coast Capital Savings to run a Blindness Youth Mentoring program, which included a series of teleconference meetings to discuss important blindness-related topics, such as cooking without looking, cane travel, employment and self-advocacy.

Members have written interesting and educational speeches for Federation conventions, as well as articles for the organization's publications, 'The Blind Canadian' and the 'BlindSide E-news.'

In 2011 – 2012, the Canadian Federation of the Blind trialed its first office.

Honours and Accomplishments:

In the Millennium Year 2000, through the initiative of Federation members, founding member Dr Paul Gabias received an Honourary Doctorate degree from the University of Victoria, for his work in bringing Federationism to Canada, and in 2011, long-time member, Graeme McCreath published his book, 'The Politics of Blindness: From Charity to Parity.' www.thepoliticsofblindness.com

Fundraisers:

The organization has held numerous creative and successful fundraisers to aid its cause, including events such as the 'Sky's the Limit' concert, the 'Jazz It Up' concert, several 'Rowdy and Raucous' auctions, the Super Trivia Night and the Oktober-Fest and Peter Cotton-tail Dinners.

Through its ongoing fundraising with Country Grocer, Thrifty Foods, and the generosity of the Lions Club, the Federation also gains necessary funds for the organization.

The Passion Continues

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is committed to the equality and empowerment of blind Canadians. Members believe in the capabilities of blind people and their accomplishments; they believe in having high expectations for their rightful, personal potential, and a 'can do' attitude.

Federation members are mentors, but also mentees. Each member gains blindness skills from working together and sharing mutual knowledge and experience, such as cane travel, technology, Braille, self advocacy, as well as confidence, independence and inspiration.

Members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind acknowledge the generosity of community organizations, businesses and individual supporters, sighted and blind, who believe in our cause and who show their belief through their volunteerism and generous financial support. Thank you.

A Home Grown Public Library Solution

By Allan Carlson, project specialist with the Libraries and Literacy Branch of the BC Ministry of Education.

Editor's Note:

Full and equal participation in society requires access to the written word, but 95 percent of published books are never produced in alternate formats for the blind and print-disabled.

Because of the severe shortage of books in alternate format, members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) believe public libraries should make it a top priority to acquire books that are accessible to blind and print-disabled people.

The main goal is equal library access: the same book, at the same time, from the same library.

Allan Carlson, project specialist with the Libraries and Literacy Branch of the B.C. Ministry of Education, shows a clear understanding of the rights of blind citizens and patrons of public libraries. It is refreshing to find a government service, not only willing, but eager, to deal with blind Canadians directly, without an intermediary.

The following text is taken from remarks delivered by Allan Carlson to the CFB Convention in May, 2012.

Hello everyone,

The announcement I am here to make today is the culmination of work that began approximately three years ago, when Mary Ellen Gabias, from the Canadian Federation of the Blind, approached my Director, Jacqueline van Dyk, to talk about library service for the print-disabled; the resulting conversation underscored the driving need for action to address library services for the print-disabled.

Three years ago, Jacqueline invited Mary Ellen to attend a gathering of B.C. public libraries, to give them a better idea about how blind people access books; Mary Ellen's presentation aroused interest in promoting local contributions to library service for the print-disabled.

Interest grew keener that year when B.C.'s participation in the CNIB Partnership program ended. But, more than anything, the collapse of the Initiative for Equitable Library Access (IELA), led by Libraries and Archives Canada, kick-started the journey leading up to today's announcement.

After the collapse of IELA, B.C. stakeholders, including the Canadian Federation of the Blind and Libraries and Literacy Branch, began talking in earnest about a vision of a public library service for the print-disabled.

Various groups offer services to the print-disabled in B.C. The K-12 education sector, the post-secondary education sector and public libraries all work to similar ends, but not necessarily together.

In the summer of 2010, Jacqueline called a meeting of B.C. stakeholders. This stakeholder meeting included: BC College and Institute Library Services (CILS); the Provincial Resource Center for the Visually Impaired (PRCVI); the Crane Resource Centre of UBC; Special Education Technology – British Columbia (SET-BC); and Accessible Resource Centre (ARC BC).

The focus of the meeting was: to imagine a library service, built around a shared repository of accessible materials that all stakeholders would support, and all users, regardless of age or circumstance, could use.

The vision of the meeting was: to create a single user experience and common platform that would reduce cost, make maximum use of scarce resources and provide patrons with a stable environment and greater reading choices. In short; to create free public library access to a wide range of materials for the print-disabled.

This is the message we heard from so many of the print-disabled, and it became the blueprint for the work that led up to today.

I was privileged to be a part of this process and was struck by the dedication of the people working in this field. This is a group of people who feel strongly about what they do, and their willingness to cooperate, collaborate and work with one another is truly inspiring.

The dedication of people like Jacqueline van Dyk, Mary Ellen Gabias and many others in the stakeholder community, overcame the inertia, funding challenges and other roadblocks, and drove the positive changes that led us to where we are today.

I am pleased to announce that the province of B.C., along with three other provincial partners, has joined hands to move forward with a home-grown solution, to provide access to alternate format materials to the print-disabled through public libraries.

We have the support of B.C.'s stakeholders groups and, most importantly, the technology, funding and commitment of our partners. I commend the provincial librarians, who have shown courage, insight and dedication in joining together to build this service.

I do not have many details to share with you today, because it is early-going and there is still much to do, but I can say, we are working aggressively and hope to have something more concrete to announce by the end of summer.

***Step With Confidence
Perspectives from Blind Adults about their Post-Secondary and
Employment Experiences - By Gail Copp***

“Do not give up” said Remy Chartier, when asked what piece of advice he would give to blind people seeking employment. Chartier was one of six panelists who participated in the Employment Panel during the Canadian Federation of the Blind’s 2012 Convention this past May. The panelists, all of whom are blind and are either seeking employment or are currently employed, offered solutions to obstacles faced during the job search; recounted amusing anecdotes about overcoming the misconceptions employers have about blindness; and shared the message that it’s important to keep moving forward until you’ve reached your employment goal.

Advocating for yourself

Panelists agreed the public sometimes has an inaccurate view and negative attitude of what blind people can do. Jessica Rathwell recounted her experiences completing a digital media class while in university.

“The class started well. I learned about web design, coding, etc. I loved it. I woke up every morning excited to go to this class and learn. I like to be creative, to use technology, to do web design; I was fired up and ready to go. One morning, I received an email from a professor that said, “We don’t know what to do with you about the video project, so we are going to un-enroll you from the class. The other blind students in the class received the same email.”

Rathwell reflected, “I think it was a misunderstanding. The prof wasn’t sure what to do, but we had a meeting in person and cleared up the misunderstanding. My obstacle was that someone from the get-go told me I couldn’t do it. Now, since we educated them about what blind people are capable of doing, the program is more open to blind students.”

Donna Hudon dealt with the pre-conceived attitudes of an instructor while taking a required course for work. “I have taken classes in child and youth care; I took one recently on dealing with physical crisis situations. The instructor asked me how I would handle that part of the class. I said, ‘The same way as any other student.’ When the

instructor was teaching us how to get out of grabs, hair-pulls and bites, I changed her opinion of what a person who couldn't see could do; I was strong, flexible and able to get out of physical holds.”

“I don't know when or even if that will ever change,” said Chartier about the attitudes the public has about hiring a blind person, “But a blanket label will not suffice in identifying our individual needs. Only we know what we need. Only we can put forth the effort to learn what resources are available.”

Barriers in technology

Universities and work places are becoming more digital. School assignments are provided online, data entry programs are graphically based, and these formats may not be accessible to screen readers.

Karl-Erik Sonvisen noticed this change at the beginning of his second year at college. “Every year there is a new textbook with a different publisher. The teacher says to go online and do our assignments, but most of these educational websites used by colleges are not at all accessible to blind people.” Sonvisen got involved at his college to make a change. “I am working with the Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities at Camosun College to streamline things because they are out of date with technology; they are slowly getting up to date now.”

“I worked at a call centre for four years and was privileged to know a technologically smart individual,” Aedan Staddon said about his experiences with changes in technology on the job. “I used JAWS, a text-to-speech program, to do my work, but because of the changing software, from an HTML web-page to a user interface with little text, it grew more and more difficult for me to do the job.”

“My supervisor managed to keep myself and a few other blind people employed for four years, but the company refused to upgrade their software, and the blind workers were not given an opportunity to evaluate new software to determine whether it could work with JAWS.”

Chartier framed the changes in technology as being a possible solution to employment barriers. “I think it's safe to say most accessibility obstacles can be circumvented or utterly destroyed by technology, ingenuity and forethought,” he said. “Sometimes it's a simple process, other times we need to think outside the box.”

Discussing blindness in a job interview

Each panelist was asked by panel moderator, Gail Copp, to explain how they discuss their blindness with potential employers throughout the job search.

“People, I find, are just a bit leery of the blindness itself, and also about talking about it,” said Chartier. “I am forthright with a potential employer about my blindness. I tell

them exactly what my sight limitations are, and why. I make them feel comfortable by asking questions, and try to put a positive spin on my answers, especially when they relate to whether or not I can do a particular task; I find most people are very receptive and a lot less leery after I've done this."

"My current employer knew ahead of time about my blindness and got me in touch with another bank employee in Kamloops who was also blind. I told the interviewers exactly what I would need and what I could and could not do; this helped a lot."

"When I went to a call centre to apply for a job, my blindness was obvious," said Staddon, "I came in with a computer and a USB powered scanner to scan the application form. I said, 'Yes, I'm blind, I might need a bit of help, but I can do it;' that was a fast track to the interview. I got the job."

Harold Tritthardt agreed, "Confidence is big. I didn't apply because I didn't think I could do it."

Knowing you can do it

"Another difficulty is knowing what is involved in a job and figuring out if I can do the job or not," said Staddon, when asked about obstacles in finding employment. "I can lift boxes in a warehouse, but is that all that is required to do the job?"

"When I don't know everything involved in a job, the only thing I can do is ask people." The discussion turned to the importance of networking with blind people currently in the workforce who can answer these questions.

"My hope is to find more blind people who are interested in the same fields as me, and to discover how I can eliminate any barriers I encounter," said Hudon.

"Knowing that other blind people are doing the same thing is helpful," agreed Rathwell. "For example, I want a job at the Apple store, and I know two blind people in the States who work at one; this gives me hope that it's not totally new. Blind people are already doing this job. Successful blind people are paving the way."

"Circumstance and technology have made us a global support group of people with individual experiences," said Chartier. "We can use those experiences, resources and contacts to help each other. Over the years, I realized that it never hurts to talk to people. And if you can learn to listen to what they're saying, you can uncover possibilities you never even considered."

Moving Forward

"Just don't give up. Put one foot in front of the other, and say, 'Yes I can,' with no hesitation," said Tritthardt. The importance of staying positive through the frustration of a long job search was echoed by all of the panelists.

“It may take dozens of rejections, and hundreds of encouraging thoughts, prayers or words. But if we always strive to put our best foot forward, we will inevitably get that miraculous call: ‘We would like to offer you this job,’” said Chartier.

“Keep moving forward at whatever speed you can,” said Staddon, “Whatever pace you’re at, just keep moving forward.”

“Confidence doesn’t necessarily mean you have to be brave all the time; the most important thing is to lose the fear,” said Sonvisen. “There is no reason to be afraid. What is the worst that could happen? Rejection by one person at a time?”

Rathwell concluded the panel discussion with a famous slogan, “Just do it,” she said, “Henry David Thoreau said to ‘Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.’ Step out with confidence. We are fabulous and employable, and there’s no reason everyone in this room cannot have a job.”

The Panelists

Remy Chartier lives on Vancouver Island with his wife Chelsea. He works as a bank teller for the Royal Bank. He is a fiction writer, sound designer, aspiring musician and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. He dreams of one day publishing his series “The Migrator Chronicles” and getting a job as a voice actor or soundscaper.



The Employment Panel, from left to right: Karl-Erik Sonvisen, Aedan Staddon, Donna Hudon, Gail Copp, Remy Chartier, Jessica Rathwell, Harold Tritthardt.

Photo by: Harold Tritthardt

Gail Copp, panel moderator, works as a software developer for an IT consulting company in Vancouver, BC. She is First Vice-President of the Canadian Federation of the Blind and spends her free time volunteering in the community.

Donna Hudon is a family supporting and fun-loving wife and mother. She lives in Nanaimo, BC with her husband and two children. She is working to obtain a Child and Youth Care degree, and is now focusing on the area of child protection. She will complete her degree in April 2013.

Jessica Rathwell is 27, totally blind and pursuing her dream job to work for Apple. She just finished her Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in creative writing/journalism from Vancouver Island University. Apart from all things Apple, Jessica’s other passions include: singing, reading, web design/accessibility and Starbucks coffee.

Aedan Staddon is 27 years old and lives in Nanaimo BC. He has worked as an operator at a call centre and a counselor at a camp for blind children. More recently, he has worked through the Nanaimo Regional Disability Resource Centre, to teach students how to use computers.

Karl-Erik Sonvisen is 20 years old. He attends Camosun College in Victoria BC and is majoring in marketing with a minor in accounting. He is also an accomplished musician and avid downhill skier.

Harold Tritthardt has just embarked on his third career after recently returning to college. He now works as a Bookkeeper/Payroll consultant in Victoria, BC. His interests are sailing, curling and heading out to the movies with friends.

Reaching the Top Perspectives from Blind Professionals in a Variety of Careers

Three blind Canadians, (a Human Resource Specialist, a Massage Therapist and a Psychology Professor), recently answered questions about their careers for the magazine via email. These three professionals represent a diverse range of careers blind Canadians are doing and demonstrate the capabilities of blind people.

* * *

Jen Goulden lives in Ottawa and is a member of the Canadian Federation of the Blind. She works as a Human Resources Program Assistant for the Government of Canada. Jen speaks fluent French, English and Spanish. She sings, plays the piano and loves to travel. Jen also spends time promoting Braille literacy.

Blind Canadian: What do you do in your employment?

Jen Goulden: My job involves a variety of tasks. I prepare correspondence, create Excel spreadsheets to manage data, and research policies and directives to determine best practices throughout government departments.

I am currently working for a new government department, and have been assisting to put some of our Human Resources systems in place. I write, edit, translate, (usually French to English), and review translations to ensure accuracy.

BC: What kind of training / education did you receive before securing your employment?

JG: I have a Master's degree in linguistics from the University of Ottawa. I began my career in the government working as a Braille proofreader. (I received proofreading certification in 2004).

BC: What alternative strategies and techniques do you use on the job, if any?

JG: I use a Braille display so I can read what is on my computer screen. I also use speech software (Job Access with Speech or JAWS) which is installed on my computer. I use a scanner to read faxes and other printed documents, and I also use a slate and stylus to take notes when necessary. (This is a tool used to emboss Braille and is the blind person's equivalent of a pen or pencil.)

If visual aspects of a document are critical, I ask a coworker to take a quick look at it before I send it off.

BC: What successes in your career path have been particularly important and memorable to you?

JG: I served on regional and national committees for employees with disabilities. Because of my involvement with these committees, I received an Employment Equity Award presented by the Assistant Commissioner of my branch.

I was excited when I got my first job in Human Resources. I needed a change from proofreading, and wanted to gain experience and develop skills in a field not related to blindness.

BC: What has been your greatest challenge?

JG: The biggest challenge I face, which is probably true for most blind people, is the stigma society attaches to blindness. Even with employment equity laws and with "political correctness," a pervasive belief still exists that eyesight makes people competent.

BC: What words of wisdom would you share with other blind people embarking on your career path or any career path?

JG: Good computer skills are essential. Know your strengths - and your weaknesses. It is important to know what you are likely to need with regard to accommodation on the job, such as adaptive technology.

The sighted people interviewing you will have preconceived notions about what you can and cannot do, and about the things they think you would need to do the job.

You need to come across as knowledgeable about your own strengths and accommodation requirements. Otherwise you are likely to be pushed around and may be accommodated for disabilities you do not have.

As frustrating as it can be, remember you are almost always in the role of educator. Know your rights as an employee and as a Canadian citizen and stand up for them when necessary.



Jen Goulden

Some people will say you are limited simply because you are blind. Others will say you are absolutely wonderful simply because you are blind. Do not listen to either extreme. Listen to the people who judge you for who you are. These people will evaluate your abilities in the same way they evaluate the abilities of everyone else, and they will not judge you solely on the basis of your blindness.

* * *

Karyn Lawson is a Registered Massage Therapist. She lives in Trail, BC and runs her own company called Inner Vision Massage Therapy. Karyn is a mother of two young children. She is a self-taught bass player, singer songwriter, and loves to explore her creativity through music. Karyn also does a regular radio program at Salmo Community radio, (92.1ffm local, or salmofm.ca).



Karyn Lawson

Blind Canadian: What do you do in your employment?

Karyn Lawson: As a Registered Massage Therapist (RMT), I work within the healthcare field to provide therapeutic treatment for people with chronic or acute injuries. I work alongside chiropractors and physiotherapists and receive referrals from doctors to treat a variety of soft tissue issues.

I use a variety of modalities such as trigger point release, facial work, deep tissue, frictioning of scar tissue and much more. I focus mostly on deep tissue work with clients but also give massage treatments purely for relaxation.

I encounter many conditions such as tendonitis, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, headaches, sprains, degenerative disc and arthritic conditions, repetitive strain injuries, post-op orthopedic surgeries and chronic and acute muscle spasms.

I work in a clinic out of my home.

BC: What kind of training / education did you receive before securing your employment?

KL: I attended the Okanagan Valley College of Massage Therapy in Vernon, B.C., where I was enrolled in a three-year, three thousand-hour program. This degree involved courses in anatomy, physiology, pathology, clinic theories and much more.

I also worked in the student clinic for 2 years and completed two three-week internships with another therapist.

BC: What alternative strategies and techniques do you use on the job, if any?

KL: Massage therapy is a great profession for a blind person, as it requires little adaptive modalities. All I need is a massage table and my hands. However, this said, I

do run a PC with a calendar program and I take notes, write receipts and rebook appointments with the use of JAWS (Job Access with Speech) as my screen reader.

BC: What successes in your career path have been particularly important and memorable to you?

KL: Overall, I feel incredibly fulfilled in my work. I enjoy meeting new clients, and equally enjoy deepening relationships with my regular clientele. I love the one on one time and personal intimacy I share with a variety of people.

It is rewarding to know I make people feel better in their bodies and that they leave my office less tense and more relaxed.

I am self sufficient and earn a good income as a blind person; this also creates a sense of giving back to my society.

BC: What has been your greatest challenge?

KL: One of the greatest challenges of my job is travel. I operate out of my home, but currently pick up appointments in a chiropractor's office. As I have linens and my computer to carry, and no access to public transportation in my city, I am heavily dependent on others to get me to and from my external work place. Working from home is ideal for me.

BC: What words of wisdom would you share with other blind people embarking on your career path or any career path?

KL: Try and find something that you love and just do it!

* * *

Dr. Paul Gabias lives in Kelowna, BC with his wife and four children. He currently works as an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, where he has developed several courses, including courses in tactile perception and in the psychological aspects of advocacy.

Dr. Gabias was born in Montreal and obtained his Ph.D. from New York University in 1988.

Twenty years ago, he and his wife Mary Ellen brought the National Federation of the Blind to Canada. Dr. Gabias holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Victoria in recognition of his pioneer work to improve opportunities for the blind of Canada.

Blind Canadian: What do you do in your employment?

Paul Gabias: I am an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of British

Columbia Okanagan. I have held appointments at different universities as: Lecturer, Visiting Assistant Professor, Assistant Professor, and now Associate Professor. The next and highest level to achieve is Professor.

In my current position, I teach various psychology courses at the undergraduate level. In the past, I taught graduate courses in Statistics and Perception at other universities.

This year I taught:

- Psychology 315 - Psychology of Touch One
- Psychology 462 - Evolutionary Psychology of Aggression and the Blind Movement
- Psychology 314 - Non-Visual Perception
- Psychology 316 - Psychology of Touch Two
- Psychology 111 - Introductory Psychology

I prepare syllabi, lectures and exams for each course. I grade exams and regularly do scholarly research to deliver up-to-date material for my classes.

For example, in my introductory psychology class, the department adopted a new textbook, and I spent several months doing the preparatory work necessary to teach with this new text. This summer, I successfully prepared and taught a concentrated summer course in Introductory Psychology.

In the second semester of the 2013 - 2014 academic year, I will be teaching a course in ecological perception. This will be the fourth course I have developed without pre-existing textbooks and ancillary material.

Previously, I developed two levels of the Psychology of Touch, as well as the course on the Evolutionary Psychology of Aggression and the Blind Movement.

I am privileged to have the freedom to pursue my academic interests; though this freedom does require creativity and mastery of subject material. I enjoy the research required to develop these courses.

As well as my teaching and research work, I am a member of the Curriculum Planning Committee for the Unit of Psychology; a member of the Intro Texts Selection Committee; a member of the Standing Committee on Reappointment; and a member of the Standing Committee on Initial Appointments. I also represent the psychology department on the Equity Representatives Committee.

BC: What kind of training / education did you receive before securing your employment?



Paul Gabias

PG: I received a Ph.D. from New York University. My field is experimental Psychology, with a concentration in Perception.

BC: What alternative strategies and techniques do you use on the job, if any?

PG: I use Braille, computer speech access, recorded books, and a human assistant.

My assistant brailles all of my materials and makes sure I have visual access to information. She operates the equipment for grading multiple choice exams as this equipment requires sight to use.

I am responsible for training this assistant. Currently I am helping her to improve her ability to read and write Braille, as I use Braille every day in my working life. I have another assistant who can be available on weekends. Both of my assistants are paid by the University.

The University also records books for blind students and professors at the Crane Library. The Crane Library at the University of British Columbia transcribes text and course materials for students, staff, and faculty members who require alternatives to print, and provides technical resources that permit independent access to information. I also use recorded text books from Learning Ally, previously known as: Recording for the Blind.

BC: What successes in your career path have been particularly important and memorable to you?

PG: My most memorable career successes include: Earning my Ph.D in 1988; Obtaining six different jobs at six different universities; Developing and teaching a personal understanding of the principles of visual perception, and how those principles of perception apply equally to all perceptual processes, such as seeing and looking around, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling (I owe this understanding to Dr. James J. Gibson, Dr. Robert Lambert, who was blind, and Dr. John Kennedy); Receiving an Honourary Doctorate from the University of Victoria for my contribution to a deeper understanding of the capabilities of blind people through my research on haptic perception and raised-line drawings, and for my work to bring the National Federation of the Blind to Canada; Working to explain human-animal interactions in the use and training of guide dogs by blind people.

Editor's note: The sighted have always trained guide dogs, but blind people are equally capable of accomplishing this training.

BC: What has been your greatest challenge?

PG: My greatest challenge is always the one I am dealing with at the moment. So now my greatest challenge is teaching tomorrow's class.

I encountered challenges and worked hard to set up optimal accommodations at the university; the process involved negotiations between the Faculty Association and the university. After much negotiation, the parties involved achieved a working resolution. I also work hard to balance family life, raising children, and a productive professional career.

BC: What words of wisdom would you share with other blind people embarking on your career path or any career path?

PG: Decide on what you want to do; do it, and do whatever it takes to get it done. Then, keep doing it. Success is the progressive realization of a worthy goal.

To me, every day is a new beginning, full of dreams and new possibilities. It takes creativity and practice to discern and create those new possibilities, and it takes courage and discipline to consistently follow up on them and to actually realize them. Happiness takes discipline.

Editor's note: Dr. Gabias has another career with the Nikken Corporation. He is a Certified International Independent Wellness Home Consultant with the rank of Gold. Here is what he says about this work.

In February 2002, my wife Mary Ellen and I founded the Gabias Wellness Center, where we host Wellness Seminars.

At our centre we host Nikken Wellness Consultants from around the world, such as accomplished physicians or veterinarians who have contributed prodigiously to their field of medical research and clinical practice. Others come from well-respected professional backgrounds. Still others have taken up wellness as their new profession.

These professionals help people learn about the prevention of illness, the management of lifestyle and ways to minimize or eliminate drugs and surgery.

We often hold wellness seminars via teleconference. Most participants come from Canada and the United States, but some have come from as far away as Australia and Saudi Arabia. Topics discussed in these Wellness Seminars relate to the importance of proper hydration, clean water, rest and relaxation, stress reduction, clean air, fitness, nutrition and contact with the earth and the sun and the issue of how modern technology can enhance these basic elements of prevention

Starting in May of 2004, I began conducting a longitudinal field study to gather the wellness profiles of people. I continue to accumulate information about new people and their wellness profiles.

I present the study participants with various options to improve their well-being, and assess them periodically as they pursue those options. I assess people in five areas of life: body, mind, family, society, and finances.

With respect to developing my Nikken business, I attend in person corporate and field training events; take advantage of the webinars and the individual training available; and continuously read books and articles on personal development and how to achieve success.

The Sorry State of Blindness Training in Canada By Doris Belusic and Elizabeth Lalonde

If you became blind today in Canada, where would you go for meaningful training in blindness skills, so you could continue living your life well? You would think in Canada, in the 21st century, meaningful, publicly funded rehabilitation for blind persons, including those newly blind, would exist. But sadly, this is not the reality. Some limited training through charity exists, but largely, blind people are neglected by the mainstream public infrastructure and are mostly left on their own.

As a result of the lack of publicly funded and publicly accountable rehabilitation for blind Canadians, many blind citizens suffer from unemployment, isolation and a lower quality of life. The unemployment rate among blind Canadians is in the vicinity of 80 percent, but this does not have to be the case. Like everyone, each blind person has his or her own potential.

Many blind Canadians, including those who are newly blind, desperately want and need blindness skills training, which means they must learn alternative, non-visual ways, to be independent, employable, and to lead full and productive lives.

Other countries have demonstrated that with adequate training, support and opportunity, blind people can and do compete on terms of equality with the sighted. The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) is calling for publicly funded, publicly accountable intensive blindness skills training for those who want it, and for choice in where to obtain it.

Intensive Blindness Skills Training:

Three world-renowned training centres exist in the U.S: the Colorado Center for the Blind, (www.cocenter.org); the Louisiana Center for the Blind, (www.lcb-ruston.com); and Blindness: Learning In New Dimensions (BLIND Inc.) in Minnesota, (www.blindinc.org).

At these centres, students live on-site, generally for a period of nine months. The students learn essential blindness-specific skills, including: independent travel with the long white cane, adaptive computer technology, Braille, life skills, home management, industrial arts, recreation, job preparation and, most importantly, self confidence.

The goal of the centres is for individuals who participate to become employed upon completion of the rehabilitation program, and for individuals to achieve greater independence, confidence and a better quality of life.

Just like other people who experience an accident, illness or disability - blind people, whether they are congenitally blind or they become blind later in life due to an accident or illness - require rehabilitation to become independent.

At the centers, approximately 90 percent of graduates go on to live independently, and within six months of finishing the program, 80 per cent secure employment, or choose to pursue post-secondary education.

These world-renowned centres are successful for three main reasons:

1. The centres teach using 'Structured Discovery,' a teaching approach based on a model of self-help, and learning through practice and problem-solving.
2. All instructors at the centres are blind, or have trained for several months under blindfold. The blind instructors serve as successful and positive role models for the students.
3. The centres promote a positive view on blindness, a belief in the unlimited potential of blind people and have high expectations of all participants.

The Sorry State of Blindness Training in Canada:

Believe it or not, blind Canadians receive no intensive rehabilitation or training services from the government.

The CFB is working hard to convince the provincial and federal governments that blind citizens must have an opportunity to receive this essential training. But, until centres of equal quality are available in Canada, the Canadian Federation of the Blind is determined that blind people will get public funding to obtain training from the high-quality centres that already exist in the U.S.

Unfortunately, despite much lobbying, no government funding has yet been obtained.

The only Canadians who are able to attend a U.S. centre are those who either have a private means to pay their tuition, or it is because of American charity.

Interestingly, in Canada, some people with disabilities, other than blindness, such as people with spinal chord injuries, receive publicly funded rehabilitation. But, so far, the Canadian government has not stepped up to its responsibility for providing rehabilitation for its blind citizens.

Though many blind youth and working-age people have a better-than-average post-secondary education, the dismal unemployment rate (which is higher than for most other disability groups), still exists.

Sadly, right now, throughout Canada, there are blind working-age people who need to attend a centre, but due to financial constraints, and no government funding, they go year after year without it.

According to Statistics Canada, the majority of blind Canadians exist on an average annual income of \$15,000, have an unemployment rate of near 80 per cent, and largely live in isolation, without the confidence, skills and opportunity to participate fully in the community.

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

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

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

1. Blind Canadians have the right to the opportunity to learn the skills and attitudes of blindness necessary to succeed economically and socially. Because the opportunity to learn these skills is a right, it must be provided at government expense. Just as the right to a free and public education exists for all Canadian children, the right to rehabilitation must be provided to blind adults.
2. Blind Canadians are not a homogeneous group. Therefore, it is appropriate that a variety of rehabilitation options be available to meet varying needs.
3. Individuals seeking rehabilitation have the right to informed consent when choosing the type of services that best fit their needs.
4. Funding for rehabilitation should follow the individual, not the program.
5. An Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plan, specifying the type of training to be provided, the responsibilities of the entity providing the training, the government funding it, and the rehabilitation student, and the expected outcomes, must be drawn up and agreed to jointly by the government, the blind individual and the service provider.
6. Evaluation of contracts for rehabilitation will be based on the outcomes for the students, not merely on the contractor's provision of services.
7. Students may not be geographically limited in their choice of training options; those choosing training out of province or in another country will continue to receive medical coverage and other public benefits while participating in the training course.

Rally for Change and Choice

Editor's Note:

On February 15, 2011, over 40 members of the blind community and their supporters, joined together on the Legislative grounds in B.C.'s capital, to tell government and the public, that a near 80 percent unemployment rate is far too high; an absence of intensive blindness skills training in this country is appalling; and the lack of public funding and public accountability for rehabilitation and training of blind people is a disgrace.

From a press release issued by the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) in the winter of 2011:

On February 15, 2011, blind British Columbians gathered in B.C.'s capital, in front of the Legislature, to raise awareness about the urgent need for publicly funded, intensive training in blindness skills, such as cane travel, Braille and adaptive technology.

With proper training, blind people can compete on terms of equality with their sighted peers, but unfortunately, the opportunity to learn and master essential blindness skills is not available to most blind Canadians. The true cost of this neglect has fallen on the backs of blind people, who too often, live lives of poverty and isolation.



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

Blindness skills training in Canada is inadequate, and can only be accessed through charity. The charity-based model of rehabilitation has failed blind citizens of our country, where only two out of 10 blind people of working age are employed. Public funding must be allocated to ensure this basic human right.

“The public does not realize that blind citizens are not receiving the services they need and deserve. Government takes no responsibility for the situation, and chooses to leave the lives and futures of blind citizens in the hands of charity,” said Elizabeth Lalonde, then president of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), a grassroots, advocacy organization, made up of and led by blind people.

“I have gaping holes in my life skills, and nowhere to go to really learn the skills I need to be independent,” said Miriam Youssefi, a blind Victoria woman, in her early forties. “Others have suggested I move to a group home or get home support, but I would rather dig my grave than do that. I want to learn the skills so I can help myself.”

“I am 31 and have academic credentials, but I don’t have the confidence or the support I need to actually get a job and be self-sufficient,” said Erin Lacharity, another blind woman, in Victoria.

“I lost my sight in an accident a few years ago. When I went blind, I was only given minimal assistance with the cane and one cooking lesson, and that’s it. Because I have had no intensive training, it has really affected my quality of life personally and professionally,” said Shane Baker, a Victoria resident, in his early thirties.

The rally was the first time blind people came together en masse to talk about the situation and to advocate for positive change. “The rally was a proactive move forward, a positive step taken by blind people to change their lives, and was the first of many actions the organization will take to improve the lives of blind Canadians,” said Lalonde.

The Politics of Blindness: From Charity to Parity
By Mary Ellen Gabias and Elizabeth Lalonde

In his groundbreaking book, author, Graeme McCreath, writes about the situation faced by blind Canadians, and brings their voices to life.

With great care, respect and honesty, McCreath documents the complicated and systemic issues that explain how Canada arrived at the present situation of a 75 per cent unemployment rate for blind Canadians, a staggeringly high level of poverty, a severe shortage of proper education and training, and a lack of knowledge about the plight of blind Canadians on the part of government, the public, and organizations that are supposed to help. He reviews the social factors underlying the current situation, describes how our history brought us to where we are today, and outlines positive solutions for change.

‘The Politics of Blindness’ brings clarity to the struggles of blind people in this country and describes the obstacles that plague their journey to dignity and equality.

After reading this book, people can no longer stand aside, turn away and ignore the existence of this far-reaching problem in Canadian society. ‘The Politics of Blindness’ stands as a monument to our history, a testament to the unrecognized blind citizens of our country and a guide to motivate positive change for blind Canadians now and in the future.

McCreath’s personal history brings perspective to his writing. Born in England, McCreath became blind at age 10. He was immediately taught to read and write Braille, a fortunate circumstance that benefited him throughout his career. However, by age 11, his Braille skills were not developed sufficiently for him to succeed in the examinations that would have earned him a place in the university preparatory grammar school for blind students, so he was streamed into technical training instead. He graduated with a certificate in shorthand typing and worked for three years in that field, while taking night classes at a local community college.

McCreath succeeded in qualifying for a London based physiotherapy course, specifically designed for blind students; this course incorporated a more hands-on approach than the physiotherapy courses for the sighted, though students were required to pass the same exams. McCreath became a chartered physiotherapist and worked for three years in British hospitals.



*Graeme McCreath reading an excerpt from *The Politics of Blindness* at the book launch in March 2011.*

Photo by Murray Church

While in physiotherapy training, which was open to blind students from anywhere in the Commonwealth, McCreath met his former wife (a Canadian) and emigrated with her, when she returned to Canada. After the marriage ended, McCreath remained in this country and worked at the Victoria General Hospital, in Victoria, B.C., where he met his wife, Christine. The McCreaths have three children and own a large private physiotherapy clinic in the Victoria suburbs.

An avid athlete, McCreath holds a Canadian record in able-bodied Masters powerlifting and currently competes in middle distance running.

McCreath has experienced the best and the worst of the British system of services for blind people, which allows him to analyze the Canadian situation “from the outside looking in,” though more than a quarter century in Canada makes him thoroughly conversant with the circumstances here.

Speaking about his reasons for writing ‘The Politics of Blindness,’ McCreath says, “Each of us should be given the opportunity to work and earn a living. The values of a society are reflected in universal inclusion and the belief that true citizenship comes with a productive, rewarding life.”

“Let’s make it R.E.A.L. Blind Canadians must achieve Respect, Equality, Assimilation /integration into society, and Liberty. Only with these achievements can we hope to attain first class citizenship and equal status with the sighted.”

McCreath’s work has garnered positive attention in Canada and abroad. In his foreword, the Rt. Hon. David Blunkett, Former British Minister of Education and Employment and Home Secretary, who is also blind, says in part: “It is my personal pleasure to write a foreword to ‘The Politics of Blindness,’ written by my old friend and fellow pupil from the Royal National College for the Blind, England, Graeme McCreath.”

“Not only is this a heartfelt appeal to Canadians to understand the history and background to the present situation for blind and partially sighted men and women across Canada, but also, as I found, an insight into events which shed much greater light on the development of services, or lack of them, for blind people.”

“Above all, this is a call to action. This manifesto is not only for blind people to rally round and campaign for, but a call to those in government, at every level, to act decisively in favour of equality...”

“Graeme makes a powerful case that it is the role of elected government to provide equality of opportunity by providing practical measures which make this possible. His book makes a coherent argument for this responsibility to be accepted directly, rather than delegated to not-for-profit or charitable organizations.”

“Like Graeme, I accept that employment is the best pathway out of welfare and dependence. Like him, I believe that a fundamental role for government is to ensure the self-determination of every adult through the opportunity to use their talent and creativity, and therefore, to have the opportunity to earn their own living and sustain themselves and their families. This shouldn’t be through benevolence, but through the principles of fairness and mutual self-help, as part of working in common for the benefit of all.”

In a review of McCreath’s book, Michael J. Prince, Lansdowne Professor of Social Policy, University of Victoria, author of ‘Absent Citizens: Disability Politics and Policy in Canada’ writes:

“From charity cases to contributing citizens: this is the critical analysis and, in turn, the social vision of Graeme McCreath’s new book, ‘The Politics of Blindness.’ McCreath offers compelling arguments on both why and how Canada can become a more inclusive country. His book challenges the longstanding prejudicial stereotyping and the charity-based approach to meeting basic needs of blind Canadians.”



“McCreath contends that, on balance, charities are barriers to progress in effectively addressing the unmet needs of blind Canadians and also in advancing their independence from welfare. Too often, charitable services deprive people with disabilities of their own voice, labeling them as dependent, and limiting their capacity to gain employment.”

“McCreath, therefore, recommends that the CNIB and other relevant institutions relinquish control over the lives of blind citizens. He goes further and proposes that the Canadian government could facilitate that by abolishing blind charities and replacing them with comprehensive services for blind people.”

“McCreath presents an agenda of reform that is practical and progressive, some will say radical, for improving the status of blind people, from what he characterizes as second-class charity recipients, to full participating individuals and contributing members of society; in a word, citizens.”

“To further economic citizenship for the blind in regards to paid employment, McCreath proposes universal eligibility and funding for training with adaptive equipment, as well as incentive programs for employers to recruit, develop skills, and provide promotion opportunities for blind workers.”

“This book about blindness is about nothing less than ensuring that human rights are genuinely rights for all people in our country.”

My Journey at the Louisiana Center for the Blind ***By Elizabeth Lalonde***

Elizabeth Lalonde has a BA with a double major in journalism and anthropology from the University of Victoria, she worked as a communications co-ordinator for the Province of British Columbia and served as president of the CFB from 2002 to 2012. She lives in Victoria, BC and is a mother of two young children.

I was fortunate to receive a scholarship from the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the U.S., to attend the Louisiana Center for the Blind, in Ruston, Louisiana, in 2009/2010.

The Louisiana Center for the Blind (LCB) is an intensive training centre where blind people can go to learn confidence and the skills of independence. The centre is located in a small town in northern Louisiana. I went there to learn as much as possible, so I could bring the model home to Canada and help blind Canadians. I did this. But, I did more than this.

During my time at LCB, I experienced an unexpected and tremendous sense of fulfillment, confidence and accomplishment on a personal level.

I wish to thank Dr. Marc Maurer, President of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB); Pam Allen, Director of the Louisiana Center for the Blind; the LCB staff and students; and my family for their support, patience and faith in me throughout this journey.

Following, is the story of my personal journey at LCB taken from sections of the blog I kept during my training.

The full blog is online at www.elizabethlal.blogspot.com

To read more about the Louisiana Center for the Blind, go to www.lcb-ruston.com

Friday, November 6, 2009

It Begins

I finished my first week at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. In one week, I learned to: thread a needle, slate the alphabet in Braille, travel independently around the building in sleepshades, measure wood with a click ruler, and practice on a Braille note taker. I am learning so much and thinking in ways I haven't before, calling on all my powers of concentration and skill to get through the days.



A student with a cane travel instructor working on street crossing at the Colorado Center for the Blind.

Photo courtesy of: Colorado Center for the Blind

Today, was my first outside travel lesson. My instructor and I walked back and forth in front of the centre and practiced finding streets. I worked on finding curbs. Mostly, I over-stepped them, or didn't go far enough.

Once, I stood in the middle of an intersection and heard my instructor call me back from the road. Once, I fell, almost gracefully against a parked car. But, by the end of the lesson, I walked successfully to each curb.

Today, was also the day I learned to thread a needle. I used a needle threader, and after 20 painstaking minutes, hooked the needle onto the threader, caught the thread on the hook, and pulled the thread through the eye of the needle.

Today, in shop, I measured a block of wood using a click ruler. A click ruler is the only tool created specifically for blind people. It is a metal ruler divided into inches, half inches and one-sixteenth inches. Each click represents one-sixteenth of an inch. (These rulers also come in metric.)

I am invigorated, exhausted and overwhelmed. I remind myself to forget my ego, to start fresh, and realize I am on a journey.

I moved into the LCB apartments this week. I have a lovely roommate, who is 20 years old. She is a great support and mentor.

Thursday, November 19, 2009

Another week over, travel was better this week. I am starting to orientate myself using audio and tactile cues. I didn't realize how much I used my limited vision to navigate and avoid - or not avoid - obstacles. Wearing a blindfold all day allows me to focus on my other senses.

My instructor and I walked down a few blocks from the centre. I practiced finding street crossings and staying on the sidewalks. I am learning to listen to the sounds of traffic on the parallel and perpendicular streets, and to feel the direction of the sun, or the incline of a driveway, to judge if I am walking straight. If the cars suddenly sound like they are in front of me, instead of to my left, then I know the road has not magically changed position. I have.

Like most of the teachers here, my travel instructor is blind. It is motivating to know I can eventually become as competent as he is at getting around.

In shop this week, I used a drill for the first time. The drill is heavy; it takes all my strength to hold it in place. I need to build some muscle.

Today, I fried bacon and eggs in cooking class, a task I normally use sight to do. It felt good to cook the whole meal under sleepshades. I turned the bacon with tongs. and listened to the sizzle of the bacon grow quieter, which told me it was time to flip it over. For once, I didn't burn the bacon.

The centre is putting on a Christmas play about Santa Claus losing his sight. The play is written by the Braille teacher, Mr. Whittle. In the play, Santa is depressed about going blind. He learns about the training centre in Louisiana and goes for training to become a competent and confident blind Santa.

At the centre, we have 'seminar' twice a week. Seminar gives the students and staff a chance to talk about blindness, how to handle family issues and how to think about blindness in a positive way.

Monday, November 23, 2009

I walked in sleepshades to the apartments and back, and, only veered onto the road a few times. Each time I knew right away and corrected myself. I am learning to line myself in a specific direction, by listening to the traffic.

The model of travel taught here is called 'structured discovery,' which differs from the traditional route method of travel, where the blind person memorizes specific routes. 'Structured discovery' allows the blind person to learn to travel anywhere independently using problem-solving techniques.

I am working my way through the level two contractions in Braille and am reading and slating Braille every day.

We had apartment instruction this week; this is when the staff come to the students' residence and make sure students are keeping their places clean.

On Friday, one of the students at LCB graduated. It was neat to see someone finish

what I am beginning. Her ceremony lasted an hour. Students, friends and family attended by conference call, or in person, to talk about her accomplishments and watch her get the 'freedom bell.' All graduating students receive a 'freedom bell' to keep as a symbol of their time here, and as a symbol of their new independence.

Tuesday, January 26, 2010

Getting into the swing

I am getting into a routine and working hard. I am reading Braille at 25 words a minute - a huge improvement from when I started in November.

I travelled over Christmas in sleepshades and my mom, who had come to visit, noticed that my speed and confidence had increased.

My travel instructor now assigns me independent routes. He gives me a specific route or asks me to find a store. I go to the store and bring back a business card to show I made it.

I walk with my cane at a good pace. I am fast, but working on my accuracy. Some days, the travel sessions are excellent and I reach the destination, without many detours. Other days, I veer to the other side of a street without realizing it, get turned around and walk the wrong way, or walk on the street, instead of the sidewalk. These mistakes frustrate me, but I know it is a part of my training and I will get better.

In shop class, I completed the first phase of 'grid blocks.' Now, I am making what are called 'Braille blocks.' The students scribe lines, make indications and drill holes, to create a block with six holes, like a Braille full cell. Students make three of these 'Braille blocks,' learn a new tool, make three more, and learn another tool. Most recently, I learned to use a table saw.

In computers, I am learning many new JAWS (screen reading software) and Windows commands. The instructor gives us assignments, such as to write and format a short essay about our experiences at the centre, and to create an Excel spreadsheet.

I am immersed in all this learning, but by far the most incredible part of being at LCB is the people. There are 20 students here. We do so much together and experience so many things, good and bad. The bond grows each day. LCB is a family. The immersion is not only physical immersion - to learn the skills of blindness - but also, at a deeper level, an emotional immersion. Training is a time, a space away from regular life, to take stock and work on oneself.



Elizabeth Lalonde with the Freedom Bell awarded at graduation from LCB.

Thursday, March 25, 2010

Whirlwind

My life is a whirlwind. Home seems so far away, and it feels like I have been living in Ruston, Louisiana, forever. I have been training for five months now. I am progressing in all my classes. The progression isn't as drastic as in the beginning - more a continuous evolution of skills and confidence.

The other day, I travelled 20 blocks in an hour. My speed and accuracy is increasing. But, occasionally, I still make big mistakes. Last week, I was travelling with confidence, until I discovered I had walked in the wrong direction and down the wrong road. If the construction worker hadn't told me where I was, I might have walked to Canada, before figuring out my mistake.

I am learning to focus on the parallel traffic to keep me in line and out of the parking lots. I have to avoid distractions, as much as possible. If my mind wanders, my feet follow.

In shop, I am progressing to the end of the requirements, before starting my final project. I spent at least two weeks learning to use a tool called a router. The router and I, do not have the best relationship. My first task was to tighten and loosen the bit with two wrenches at the same time. This exercise improves coordination and dexterity. It also significantly improves one's ability to bite one's tongue and stamp one's foot in frustration. You have to tighten and loosen the bit ten times without help, before progressing onto actually using the tool.



A student with an industrial arts instructor learning to use a saw at the Colorado Center for the Blind.

Photo courtesy Colorado Center for the Blind

For me, routing wasn't much easier than dealing with the bit. After some practice, I am now able to use the router to smooth the sides and corners of my Braille blocks. This week, I learned my last tool of the series, the sander. The sander is beautiful in its simplicity.

In life skills, I changed a fluorescent bulb in the ceiling, and failed. I found the light on the ceiling with my cane (yes, canes have more uses than one could imagine); I climbed the ladder and attempted to connect the new bulb; it must have jammed, because the light did not come on. I will have to do this again, before graduating from this class.

There are 25 students here now. The school is getting crowded.

Saturday, May 29, 2010

Sweat and Tears

I am at the peak of my training. It is called intensive training for a reason.

I finished the home economics part of the program, except for my meal for 40, which is this Wednesday. I cooked my meal for eight, when my mom was visiting. I cooked chicken and mushroom soup casserole, biscuits, salad and lemon mousse. I also made hot tea, for some Canadian flair. Americans, down south, don't often drink hot tea. Do you know how hard it was to find a teapot around here?

I think the meal for eight is more challenging, than the meal for 40, because it is formal; you have to set the table and serve everyone.

I grew frazzled near the end with all the last-minute things, while the guests waited in the next room.

I finished shop class yesterday. I made two memory boxes for my sons, as my final project. One is stained walnut and one cherry. My son, Ronyn, gets the cherry box, because he has red hair. My son, Rhys, gets the walnut box, because he has brown hair.

For the rest of my training, I will focus on my Braille, computers and travel.

I am making progress in Braille, but it is slow. I am still reading 30 to 40 words per minute. Sometimes, I will be reading along smoothly and quickly, then get hung up on a word, or a punctuation mark, and lose time; this frustrates me. The more I read, the less I get stuck, and the more easily I can decipher words.

I did my first 'supported drop route' a few weeks ago. On a 'drop route,' a driver takes the student and the instructor to an undisclosed location. Neither the student or the instructor know where they are. The student must find his or her own way back to the centre, using the new skills, and without asking any questions.

I was excited. First step, I determined the cardinal directions: north, south, east, west. Then, I listened for clues - quiet - except for a busy street in the distance to the south.

I walked toward the traffic sounds. When I reached the street, I heard the distinctive clink, clink sound of the cars running on concrete. This clue told me I was most likely on Alabama. Alabama is one of the only streets in Ruston, with this distinct sound.

Then, I listened and heard cars to the west on the parallel road. There weren't many cars. Those I did hear were coming from 2 directions. I determined, since I was most likely on Alabama, the street to the west could only be Bonner, Trenton, Vienna, Munro,

Minden, Homer, or Everett.

I ruled out several of these streets right away. Trenton is a busy, one way street, where the cars only go south. Munro is a fairly busy road. Bonner is also busy. I decided, it must be Homer or Everett. I went on this assumption and walked east. If wrong, I could always go back to my starting place and come up with another theory.

As I walked, I heard the one-way traffic of Trenton, and breathed a sigh. I crossed Trenton, turned south, and knew for sure.

Last week, I sprained my ankle on my way back to the apartments, after dropping off my sons at their dad's. It wasn't a hard fall, but my ankle turned the wrong way – and, boy, did it hurt. Interestingly, when I sprained my ankle, I wasn't wearing my sleepshades; if I had been, I might have paid more attention to where I was walking, and used my cane properly, instead of pushing it along in an inefficient manner.

Sleepshades are precious. They represent our hard work and determination, to get through this training and to improve on our skills. Many times my shades have hidden sweat that drips down my face, or tears that fall from my eyes.

Several of my close friends are graduating, and new students are starting the journey of training. I miss those who have left. I will be graduating in August. My time here has gone so fast, but in other ways, I have been here for a lifetime.

Tuesday, June 1, 2010

Pickle Juice

I shopped for my 'meal for 40' yesterday, so much to buy. I quadrupled the recipes. I am making chili, rice, tossed salad, baking powder biscuits and 'Dirt Cake.' Oh, and pink lemonade.

I cooked all day. The only mishaps were when I broke a jar of pickles, which fell out of the fridge and shattered into a hundred pieces of glass, drenched in pickle juice. I uttered a few unrepeatable words and spent 20 minutes cleaning up the mess.

I also put baking soda, instead of baking powder, in the biscuits, and had to re-do the whole mixture.

It was 91 degrees today, but with the humidity, it is over 100, so hot. The June bugs sing at night.

Saturday, June 12, 2010

Lost in a backyard

I timed 42 words a minute last week in Braille. I am reading in the forties now. It is nice to feel my fingers slide more quickly and smoothly across the page, and hear my voice read the story aloud, with emphasis and expression.

I have two extra cane travel classes a week. One day, I searched up and down the same block for 45 minutes, but could not find the address. Finally, frustrated, hot and exhausted - and lost in a backyard - a stranger found me and helped me back to the sidewalk. He said, "I know we aren't supposed to help you, but I saw you looking around for so long..." I thanked him profusely. It turned out I had accidentally been given the wrong address. I know that block well now.

Wednesday, July 28, 2010

I completed another graduation requirement in travel today - a 10 km walk around Ruston. My teacher gave me a preset route written in Braille, which included combinations of all the routes over my time at LCB, in one long travel session.

Part of the route involved crossing the Interstate, then going back to the other side of town: east, west, north, south, and everywhere in between. I started the route at 7 o'clock in the morning, when it was a perfect temperature for walking, about 76 degrees. I lost concentration only a few times near the end and got disoriented, but I used my skills to figure out where I was, and got back on track.

The last few weeks have been quiet. I did my 'out-of-town' route on Monday. I went to Monroe on the Greyhound and took the city bus to the mall.

I finished my final computer assignment: Braille versions of a menu; the hardest part was cutting the vinyl and binding the covers.

I timed at 57 words a minute in Braille. My goal, before leaving here, is 60; only four words away.

Friday, August 6, 2010

Out with a Bang

Today is my graduation day - just like me, to graduate during a thunder storm.

I cannot believe my journey here is over. My time here has been long and life-changing. I am excited to be going home, but, also, filled with grief to leave my life here. This is a place, both, in time and outside time, both, in this world and other-worldly. I am the same person as when I started. Yet, forever changed.

I will go soon to the library to receive my 'freedom bell.'

My Experiences at the Colorado Center for the Blind ***By Simon Jaeger***

Simon Jaeger is 20 years old. He lives in Nanaimo BC and is a high school graduate. In his spare moments, he enjoys reading, 'geeking out' on his computer, playing the piano (since he could reach the keys), socializing with close friends he has made either online or offline, and audio production (whether that includes making mashups, mixing vocals for someone, or just generally experimenting with things). He also enjoys going places and learning new things.



Simon Jaeger

Simon hopes to work in a tech-related field, either teaching others how to use technology, or perhaps doing audio production.

(This article is transcribed from a speech given at the Canadian Federation of the Blind Convention, 'The Journey,' 2012.)

In late 2010, I contacted the Colorado Center for the Blind in Littleton, Colorado about possible funding to attend the centre. In February 2011, the centre director called me and said I had been picked for a six-month scholarship, which is all they can give, and only to one international student at a time. In May 2011, I started at the centre; it was an amazing, shocking experience.

I grew up in a small town in British Columbia with no transportation. Now I found myself in downtown Denver with light rails, buses and nicely laid-out blocks.

My day at the centre consisted of four classes: travel, home management, Braille and adaptive technology. Also 45 minutes of philosophy -- a multi-purpose class for job training and discussion of various other issues, like blindness advocacy.

Since my time at the Colorado Center for the Blind, my confidence has gone way up.

The knowledge that most of the instructors at the centre were blind themselves and had been through that, or a similar program, inspired me. No question was a stupid question; the teachers were there to help. If they could do it, I could, too.

I didn't graduate because I didn't have the full 9 months. But, I did cook a dinner party for six people. Cooking this meal was stressful, but it went well. I made spaghetti and garlic bread, not out of a box, but with garlic butter I made myself. I didn't make my own noodles, but I made the sauce.

I will always remember my 'support drop' in travel class. A 'support drop' is a travel challenge, where a student gets dropped off with their instructor at an undisclosed location in the city and they must find their way back to the centre.

I asked my travel teacher on a Friday whether she thought I was ready for a 'support

drop.’ Nothing more was said until Monday morning, when the instructor said she was taking me on the ‘support drop’; it was unexpected, but maybe that was the point.

A driver took me to a downtown Denver residential area with almost no traffic. I listened and heard the faint sound of cars in the distance. I walked towards the sound. Residential streets are not nearly so well laid out as urban roads, but I gradually reached the light rail and made my way back to the centre.

Canada needs something like this. Every blind person is capable of doing what the students at that centre do; they just need the opportunity. I encourage everyone to do what they can to get that going. I want everyone to have the opportunity I did.

Editor’s note:

The scholarships Simon refers to in this article are provided by the National Federation of the Blind training centres in the United States; the scholarships are intended for people from countries in the developing world that do not have adequate resources. The Canadian government is not taking responsibility for providing this kind of blindness-skills training to its blind citizens. The Canadian Federation of the Blind is working to change this, to make government realize that blind people must have access to publicly-funded rehabilitation.

From the Visual to the Nonvisual: Making the Transition **By Elizabeth Lalonde**

Editor’s Note:

The majority of blind people have some residual vision. The acuity and field of this vision can vary widely from individual to individual. For example, some blind people may have light perception; some may have some central vision and no peripheral vision; some may have peripheral vision but no central vision; some may have a relatively wide field of vision, but see shapes and shadows through that field; some may have a small field of vision and see more detail; some may see better in dim light because of light sensitivity; some may see more clearly in a lighted environment.

In North America and most of Europe, legal blindness is defined as “visual acuity (vision) of 20/200 (6/60) or less in the better eye, with best correction possible. This means that a legally blind individual would have to stand 20 feet (6.1 m) from an object to see it - using corrective lenses - with the same degree of clarity as a normally sighted person could from 200 feet (61 m). In many areas, people with average acuity, who have a visual field of less than 20 degrees (normal being 180 degrees) are also classified as being legally blind. Approximately ten percent of those deemed legally blind, by any measure, have no vision at all. The rest have some vision, from light perception alone to relatively good acuity.” (Wikipedia)

Depending on factors like lighting and fatigue, a person’s level of vision can vary considerably. As well, many blind people have degenerative eye conditions that cause them to lose sight over time.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) use the word 'blind' to encompass everyone who is legally blind. Even when a person has some useable vision, it is still essential to learn nonvisual skills. Though residual vision can be helpful at times, it can often give wrong information, be inefficient, be unsafe and be exhausting to rely on, particularly when nonvisual skills will accomplish the same task just as effectively.

Instead of 'sight enhancement,' which many traditional agencies for the blind promote, the Federation teaches partially sighted people to enhance their blindness skills. Once a person learns nonvisual skills, they can then incorporate their residual vision into the mix. The vision will be an added benefit, not the sole, inefficient method to depend on.

Because of the prevailing belief in Canada, perpetuated by traditional agencies for the blind, that if a person has some vision, they should rely on it completely and hold off learning fully blind techniques, many people with low vision suffer, struggle and also attempt to hide their blindness, in order to conform to a norm. Sometimes low vision people live for years in this limbo between blindness and sightedness, never becoming adept at blindness techniques, and, of course, since they are legally blind, never being truly sighted.

The following piece is based on a live interview with members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) at its convention, 'The Journey,' 2012.

Two blind women, Doris Belusic and Marlene Cust, whose sight has changed over time, share how they think, how they feel and what it is like for people who are making the change from using visual to nonvisual techniques.

* * *

Doris Belusic is secretary and a founding member of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB). She has served as secretary for almost 10 years. She has been editor and is currently assistant editor of the 'Blind Canadian' magazine and writes extensively on blindness issues. She has worked for 30 years at a hospital in Victoria, B.C., and has been co-contractor with her husband in building houses.

When I was 20, I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa (RP). I'm 54 now, so I have been living with progressive sight loss for 34 years. My peripheral vision has narrowed now to the point of just a small central tunnel. But, until a few years ago, I had some useful central vision and could still read, recognize faces, make out labels – basically manage, to a degree, like a sighted person, but through a small tunnel of visual field. My mobility though, was difficult and dangerous without using a white cane.

The hardest part for me, in my transition to using a white cane, was other people's reaction to it. People were not used to seeing me with a white cane. They didn't know I had a visual impairment, and of those who knew, some didn't realize how blind I really was.

So, when they saw me using a cane, I felt they didn't understand.

I've had strangers say to me things like, "You look like you can see; why are you using a cane?" I often, as well, imagined that people thought this. Once, at the airport, when

my husband, who is fully blind, and I were going on a trip, a worker said, assumingly, "Oh, she's just carrying that cane for her husband."

Being legally blind, but having a little useful central vision - while using a white cane, made me feel sort of like a fake. It didn't help that I felt I did not fit into society's mold of what a blind person was understood to be. But, I had to get over that. It was more important for me to consider my own mobility and safety.

For the last five years, I have been using a long white cane all the time; it is liberating. It's a huge help. I take it everywhere when I go out. It provides safety and mobility. I couldn't manage without it now, and I feel comfortable and confident with it. The people in my life have gotten used to seeing me with it. The cane is a wonderful thing for me.

In the last few years, my vision has become worse, and I can't read print anymore, or recognize faces. I cannot see to shop.

The kitchen has become a challenge too. I run to my Closed Circuit TV, (a device that magnifies the image onto a screen) to read my recipes. I can't see the stuff on the counter anymore. I search for the oil and measuring cups. It is a whole different thing to measure from a pound of butter than it used to be for me.

The other night I hosted a party at our home. I served a delicious rum cake. The cake was nice and round, but when I tried to cut it, the slices were different sizes. Some guests had a skinny piece, and others had a fat one. They must have thought I was playing favourites!

I know there are ways to do these kinds of things without sight. I know many blind people who do these things all the time without any trouble. I just need to learn these techniques to make my own life easier.

Through the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), I have gained a lot of knowledge, a positive attitude and strength.

I have been to three National Federation of the Blind conventions in the U.S. and am soon going to my fourth; these are gatherings of up to 3,000 blind people, who come together to teach and learn from one another; these events are the most wonderful place to go to learn about blindness and meet blind mentors. They are so empowering and inspirational. It is good to witness this and to learn about capabilities, high expectations, a 'can do' attitude and see that being blind is OK, and that life as a blind person can be happy and successful.

* * *

Marlene Cust was born and raised in rural Alberta. She worked toward a teaching degree in Quebec and Alberta. After teaching for a few years, she returned to the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, to acquire a Master's degree and a Ph. D. in educational psychology. She worked as a school psychologist, first in Alberta and then for 25 years in Prince George, B.C. She retired in 2004 and settled in Victoria, B.C., where she now lives with her partner and her small companion dog. Marlene enjoys writing, listening to audio books, walking and hiking; daily pool workouts at the rec centre, crossword puzzles and other word games, and socializing with friends.

I have retinitis pigmentosa (RP) and macular degeneration (MD). Although I cannot read the title on the cover of a book, I can read the words and sentences within the book.

I made it through my career as a sighted person, despite many falls and collisions with people and objects. The biggest obstacles to using a white cane were my own psychological issues.

A few years ago I got a cane from the CNIB and somebody came and showed me how to use it.

Sometimes I went out to a place, where I felt sure nobody would know me, to practice and feel what it was like to use the white cane. A couple of times on these outings, I ran into somebody I knew.

I heard comments like, "Why do you have that stick? You don't need that." Somebody else asked if I was legally blind, and at the time I wasn't, so it made me feel guilty. I went home and put the cane away, and convinced myself that I didn't really need it.

The turning point came when I read Doris Belusic's article, 'Out of the Closet - With My White Cane.' In this article, Doris talks about the same issues and feelings I was experiencing, and her words helped me recognize the biggest hurdle was my own attitude.

About a year ago, I came to the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) 'Find Your Freedom: Discover the Long White Cane' workshop and got a cane, and decided I was going to use it. Making that decision turned things around for me.

Once I made the commitment to using the white cane, it was a relief to let go. I do not use it in the way many blind people do. I do not always need it to feel my way, but it gives me more assurance in getting around.

The white cane explains to sighted people why I might inadvertently bump into them, or the furniture; why I might be slow to make my way on the stairs; or why I am unable to see when a clerk in a store hands me my purchase or a pen or the credit card machine. I used to feel embarrassed when this happened, when people did not know I was blind. I was afraid they would think I was being rude or dismissive of them.

Now, I am more open about talking to people who ask me about my cane. I let them know about loss of vision, and educate them. It has been a wonderful and liberating experience for me.

Editor's Note:

For more information about becoming blind and the transition from using visual to nonvisual skills, please contact the Canadian Federation of the Blind or see the following articles on this topic from previous publications of the 'Blind Canadian':

'Out of the Closet - With My White Cane,' by Doris Belusic, published in Volume 3, 'Blind Canadian' magazine.

'Blind Pride: My Journey,' by Elizabeth Lalonde, published in Volume 1, 'Blind Canadian' magazine.

(These articles are available in print, on audio CD and online at www.cfb.ca)

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