Volume 20, December 2021

The Blind Canadian

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

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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:

- a fresh, positive, empowering approach to blindness;
- blind people mentoring blind people to gain knowledge, skills and self- confidence;
- public education about blindness and the abilities of blind people;
- advocacy to create better opportunities and to strengthen rights of blind Canadians.
- raising expectations, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our goals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our Philosophy

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

We believe it is respectable to be blind.

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

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

CFB

Committed to the
equality of blind Canadians

The Blind Canadian

A publication of the Canadian Federation of the Blind

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

The Blind Canadian is the leading publication of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB). It covers events and activities of the CFB, addresses issues we face as blind people, and highlights our members. The Blind Canadian:

- Offers a positive philosophy about blindness to both blind readers and the public at large
- Serves as a vehicle for advocacy and protection of human rights
- Addresses social concerns affecting the blind
- Discusses issues related to employment, education, legislation and rehabilitation
- Provides news about products and technology used by the blind
- Tells the stories of blind people
- Archives historical documents

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Canadian Federation of the Blind 'Choices and Goals' 2021 Virtual Convention

– Report –

By Kerry Kijewski

The Canadian Federation of the Blind convention is organized and presented by the blind for the blind.

We took 2020 off, as far as holding a convention, due to the surprise arrival of Covid-19, which hit the world only a few months before our usual springtime convention weekend.

But we came back in a big way in 2021, and the theme this year was a simple, yet apt one: 'Choices and Goals', as everything has been so uncertain for so long now. The theme couldn't be more fitting for these times we're all living through. One day, before we know it, it will be time to plan for a post-Covid world.

During the first weekend of May 2021, we put on our first-ever, all virtual convention with 67 registered attendees over those three days. People joined us online via Zoom and Facebook Live from across the country, the US, and from as far away as Northern Ireland and Kenya.

Our guest speakers were Marci Carpenter, President of the National Federation of the Blind of Washington, and our NFB representative this year was Scott LaBarre, lawyer, NFB National Counsel and President of the NFB of Colorado.

The whole weekend was a tidal wave of motivational talks, new and old friends meeting and catching up, more talk on diversity to reflect who we all are as blind Canadians, and a wide variety of topics for every taste.

Friday, April 30 – Exhibitor Presentations

Day one included technology information sessions, financial planning seminars and our virtual exhibit hall, all while capping off the first day with virtual Zoom chat rooms for connection making and reflecting on day one.

The presentations on Friday were from:
- Gateway Navigation
- Canadian Assistive Technology LTD.
- Neil Squire Society

- Plan Institute
- National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS)
- HumanWare

Saturday, May 1 – General Session Presentations

The morning was made up of two back-to-back panel discussions and the rest of the day included speeches on many blindness-related topics:

- Diversity and Intersectionality Panel: In Our Own Words, hosted by Kerry Kijewski, with panelists, Victoria Francis, Sky Mundell and Jinnie Saran
- Blindness and Parenting Panel, hosted by Nancy Gill, with parent panelists Elizabeth Lalonde, Erik Burggraaf and Melissa of the blog, “Happiness is Blind”
- Talk Description To Me, with Christine Malec and JJ Hunt
- The Impact of CNIB’s 100-Year Monopoly on Blind Canadians, presented by Daryl Jones, CFB ally and author of “CNIB: Canada’s 100-Year Monopoly Report”
- Kernels of Hope, presented by Maggie Bray
- *The Blind Canadian* Magazine, a conversation between Editor Doris Belusic and Assistant Editor Kerry Kijewski
- Braille Literacy Canada, with Natalina Martiniello, President of BLC-LBC
- “Outlook On Radio Western” Surpasses 100 Episodes, with co-hosts and siblings Brian and Kerry Kijewski
- Victoria’s Bike Lanes Found Discriminatory Against Blind Transit Users by BC Human Rights Tribunal, Case Update, May 2021, presented by Oriano Belusic
- Special Presentation, by the Canadian Organization of the Blind and Deafblind (COBD), Camp Bowen, the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind, and the Bowen Island Research and Development Society (BIRDS), presented by Jocelyn Gladysz, Alex Jurgensen and Elizabeth Lalonde
- Landlords Allowed to Refuse Housing to Blind People in Shared Accommodations, presented by lawyer, Ben Fulton

This year we had no in-person banquet. No delicious meal at shared tables, no visiting the bar with colleagues and friends (old and new). Instead, we did all that in our own homes, sharing over Zoom what we were eating for our individual banquet meals.

The banquet speeches were given by Canadian Federation of the Blind’s longtime President, Mary Ellen Gabias, with an introduction by her old friend from within the NFB, Marci Carpenter. The banquet speech by NFB representative and lawyer, Scott LaBarre, was broadcast from his Colorado backyard patio.

There was no auction or talent show this year, although the final night of convention ended with musical entertainment during our individual dinners, with a debut musical performance by “Braying in the Sky” with Maggie Bray on vocals and Sky Mundell on piano.

Brian and I were emcees for the weekend, as the brother/ sister hosting team from the radio show/ podcast “Outlook On Radio Western”. Nancy Gill once again was our door prize lady throughout convention.

Special thanks go out to Joanne Gabias for running Zoom, calling names of those with raised hands, and letting people know if they were stuck on mute. This is a lot of work and a vital job, allowing the emcees to host, along with the door prize lady, keeping everything with everyone involved moving along smoothly.

Sunday, May 2 – CFB Annual General Meeting via Zoom

Thank you to our official convention sponsors:

- HumanWare Canada
- Plan Institute
- Neil Squire Society
- Canadian Assistive Technologies LTD.
- Accessible Media Inc. (AMI)
- Purrformers Braying in the Sky Feline Therapy Center
- And a thank you to our longtime sponsors: Victoria Imperial Lions Club, Father deLestre Council of the Knights of Columbus in Kelowna, Country Grocer, as well as the Victoria Foundation and the federal government for two substantial grants that we’ve received. Also, a thank you to individual donors.

Special shoutout to the convention planning committee, including Alex Jurgensen, who stepped in for the committee chair position, but every person on that committee showed up, dedicated to putting on the best, first-ever, all virtual CFB convention.

And a special thanks goes out to all who registered, all 67 of you, because without you, there’d be nobody to put convention on for. Your attendance and active participation over the weekend, yourselves, you’re the entire point.

> “A goal properly set is halfway reached.”
> ~ *Zig Ziglar*

Making Choices, Setting Goals: Look Higher, Think Broader, Dream Bigger

Banquet Address, by Mary Ellen Gabias, CFB President
Presented at the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)
‘Choices and Goals’ Virtual Convention, April 30 – May 2, 2021

Sixty-five years ago Earl Nightingale simultaneously launched what became the beginnings of the spoken word recording business as well as the business motivation industry when he published his blockbuster recording, "The Strangest Secret." It's a classic well worth a listen. Much of what he has to say remains valid today, although some of the language is a bit antiquated and sexist, not as up-to-date as we expect now. He spoke of choices and goals, our theme of this convention.

Nightingale’s basic point was that we should remember that we become what we think about, and, where we focus our attention, our actions follow. He also said that if we could believe it and could imagine it, we could make it come true. All of those tips about making choices and setting goals that are so popular and so well publicized for sighted people apply equally well to blind people.

But as blind people, there is another layer of understanding that helps the process of making choices and setting goals, and it’s a level of understanding that we need to keep in mind if we are going to live the lives we choose to live. You cannot make a choice or set a goal that is beyond your capacity to imagine. Our goal as blind people is to help one another imagine bigger, think more broadly, and stretch ourselves and one another in ways that build and affirm.

When I was 17 years old I had dreams. I wanted to be a university graduate. I could imagine myself walking across that stage, accompanied of course, to pick up my diploma. I could imagine myself leaving university and going out and finding employment. But there were things I couldn’t imagine, not because I doubted my ability to do them, but because they never occurred to me. Things like saying to a friend, “Yah, let’s go to the mall. I’ll meet you there.” Or, “I’m cooking Thanksgiving turkey this week.” Or, “You should have seen what my kid got into last Tuesday.” All of those things that are so normal, so regular for most people were simply beyond my understanding of what was possible for me. So I did not plan for them, I didn’t choose them, I didn’t set goals for them.

Fifty years ago this June, I attended my first meeting of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the United States. I went to a local chapter meeting and it changed my world. When I got there, I had thought of myself as a pretty with-it blind person. I was a university student. I got a 4.0 — which is a perfect A grade point — in my first semester. I thought I was this blind possibility.

I went to this first Federation meeting and there was a discussion about free bus service for the blind. Do we want it or don't we? And a lot of blind people said: Well, blind people don't often have jobs. We should get free bus service. They have it in other places.

Then there was another set of voices speaking up saying: Well, wait a minute. Why don't we put our energy, instead of putting it into trying to get free bus service, why don't we put it into trying to help people find jobs? Isn't that really what we want for our future? If we have jobs, we can earn a lot more than we'll ever get with free bus service.

The conversation went back and forth and the ultimate decision was that blind people should look higher and think broader and have bigger dreams. Not that we objected to people taking advantage of things that they needed that were available, but that our goals should be broader and higher.

At that meeting there was a blind couple who casually talked about picking up their four year old from preschool. That shocked me. At that meeting there was a blind woman who was exchanging recipes with someone else. That shocked me. It didn't take long for me to understand that I had been setting my goals too low, that I had not been imagining a life full of endless possibilities, that my dreams were too little, my goals too narrow, and my choices had been limited by myself.

Because of the joy, the willingness to share, and the expanding horizons at that Federation meeting, I left feeling humbled about my foolish arrogance, but excited to know that I didn't know what the choices could be, what the possibilities were.

As I became more and more involved in the Federation, and certainly the experience of this convention tonight, the realization that as Federationists we have both the obligation and the opportunity to widen one another's horizons, to help one another dream of bigger goals, make better choices. That finding out that another blind person can do something well that we thought was impossible is not a criticism of our skill level, it's an invitation to a broader life. That our goal is not to judge one another's lacks but to improve one another's lives. To make one another's tomorrows bigger than our todays. That each of us, as blind people, have something to contribute, something that is unique to ourselves, that we are capable with a lot of intersectionalities, and each of us have such unique gifts to offer and so much joy to share.

Nightingale created masterful imagery. Our life is like a ship with a captain, helmsman, and rudder. The captain determines the destination, the helmsman plans and executes the route, and the rudder keeps the ship on course. Without a predetermined goal, a good plan for getting there, and choosing the right tools to do the job, our ship will probably not get safely out of port, let alone reach its destination.

The blind community has had its own Earl Nightingales.

First there was Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, a brilliant Alberta-born lawyer and professor, who immigrated to the United States because Canada offered so little opportunity for a blind child in the first quarter of the last century. TenBroek founded the National Federation of the Blind in the US in 1940. His speech, "Within the Grace of God," was published the same year as Nightingale's masterpiece and remains one of the founding philosophical documents of the blind movement, not just in North America, but worldwide.

TenBroek first put into words an aspirational philosophy of blindness that seemed far-fetched when he said it, but because of the progress we have made together in the Federation over the years, is largely taken for granted in many places today: Blind people can speak for ourselves; Blind people can work and should be paid the same as their sighted peers; Blind people are a cross section of the community – parents, teachers, factory workers, professionals, good people and criminals.

Most of us hear those statements and respond, "Well, duh!" But in tenBroek's day, they were radical pronouncements.

Far as we have come, and make no mistake, we have made huge advances, our task of setting goals and making choices as blind individuals remains challenging. It includes all the elements required of our sighted peers. It's the unique application of personal growth theories to blindness that bring us together tonight.

Kenneth Jernigan, Dr. tenBroek's successor as President of the NFB, loved military metaphors. Speaking of how difficult it can be to challenge widely-held attitudes, he reminded me that getting too far ahead of society can be isolating. Step out a little and be praised as forward thinking. Push too hard and all society will work together to rein you in, earnestly believing it's for your own good. Dr. Jernigan saw one of the roles of the organized blind movement as digging philosophical trenches somewhat ahead of societal front lines so that we could all feel safe to move forward, thereby advancing society bit by bit.

The first step might be permitting a blind person to travel with a companion at no additional cost. The ultimate goal is making it illegal and unthinkable that a blind person could ever be denied the right to travel alone. Until enough individual blind people assumed, or at least wanted to believe that travelling without a guide was possible, any demand for the right of independent travel seemed outlandish. "Independent" travel meant not bringing your own guide, but expecting people at the station or airport to do the guiding.

The very idea of just showing up without providing advance notice of blindness never crossed my mind until I was well steeped in the Federation. Now it would not occur to me to announce my blindness in advance. But I well remember the struggle of the transition and completely understand and respect my colleagues wherever they find themselves along that continuum.

It was Dr. Jernigan who taught me to distinguish between hypocrisy and aspirational thinking. First you have to want to believe in something; the idea must become an all but irresistible dream. Genuine first class citizenship was beyond my ability even to imagine as a 17-year-old girl who couldn't cross a street and had never walked into a store alone and bought so much as a stick of gum. I was a good student, university bound, part of a circle of sighted friends who agreed with me that I was pretty good at blindness stuff.

I had my goal of a good education and a successful career. I made choices that furthered my goals. But going by myself to meet friends at the mall? Whoever heard of such a thing! My choices and goals could not take me beyond my ability to imagine.

To say that encountering the Federation broadened my horizons wouldn't be entirely accurate. The Federation gobsmacked me with the undeniable truth that I was not the hotshot blind person I thought I was! I was humbled, embarrassed, and more defensive than I should have been. I thought I was Miss Blind Overachiever when I was really selling myself so short. I was like a penny asking for change. I wanted to believe what the Federation told me about unrealized potential with everything in me, but my reality was so far beneath my dreams!

I saw other blind people living, really expanding. I desperately wanted a fuller, freer life for myself. But what hypocrisy to claim those beliefs! As Texans say, I was all hat and no cattle.

Wanting is the first step, Dr. Jernigan explained, but waiting until you believe a thing before you say you do, will keep you stuck. Every athlete begins by talking a better game than he or she can play. Wayne Gretzky didn't score a goal the first time he picked up a hockey stick. If you wait until you believe in yourself before acting as if you do, you'll wait a lifetime. Hypocrisy isn't talking a better game than you can play right now. That's aspirational thinking. Hypocrisy is talking a great game and then remaining on the bleachers without even suiting up.

Federation aspirational thinking was never intended as a yardstick to measure us against one another or against some mythical blind person who "has it all together." It's much more like a hot air balloon allowing us to float high enough above our current reality to understand "the lay of the land" and our possibilities more completely.

Our colleagues who have been on the road longer are not there to point a finger of judgment, but to offer a beckoning hand of welcome. With every act of encouragement and every discovery of greater possibilities, we work to create, we entrench our forward progress and welcome our society to move forward with us. Let us leave this event committed to previously unimagined goals and to the day by day small choices that will make today's aspirations into tomorrow's "Well, duhs!"

As we go on with our year and find ways to give to one another, to cheer one another, to encourage one another, to ask for help when we need it from one another, to recognize we have limits but they are not because of blindness, they’re because of our personal likes and dislikes.

I will never have the precise legal interest and tolerance for details that Ben Fulton described today when he talked about changing the laws, or Scott LaBarre demonstrates when he goes through the process of evaluating contracts. I do not have Brian Kijewski’s radio voice. But I have my own gifts to offer.

Each of us can build one another in small and large ways, whether we are people who will ultimately be like firework rockets that light up the sky or whether our personal gift is being the kindling for someone else’s sparks, let’s get together, build the CFB, build one another and create a tomorrow that will help us win the marathon.

> “If you can dream it, you can achieve it.”
> ~ *Zig Ziglar*

Diversity and Intersectionality: In Their Own Words

A panel discussion presented by Kerry Kijewski, with panelists Sky Mundell, Jinnie Saran and Victoria Francis at the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) 'Choices and Goals' first-ever virtual national convention, held April 30-May 2, 2021. Below is a slightly-edited (for brevity and clarity) transcript from this discussion.

Editor's note: It is interesting how people think differently about blindness. Often people, especially sighted people, can think that blindness would be one of the worst tragedies that could befall a person. In this discussion with three fully blind panelists, we hear, among many other things, that sometimes blindness is not considered as much a challenge as other intersectionalities that people may be living with.

Kerry: Introduction
Amanda Gorman gave a presentation at Joe Biden's inauguration last January; she is a poet. She read her poem and the whole world cheered for her, but then later on, she was quoted as saying, "Being alive while black in America is exhausting."

So after she was revered by almost the whole world, a few months later, she was stopped outside her own apartment building by a police officer. So that's just why we need to talk about all of this, I think.

So we, as blind people, can't see what it looks like when, in George Floyd's case, a white male officer had his knee on a black man's neck for nine minutes. But, we can't say that we don't see colour. And we know that, just because we don't see it or experience something, that doesn't mean others don't.

So, whether it's injustice for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour), African-Americans and the policing problem there, or here in this country with the actions of the RCMP in the Colten Boushie case, there's nothing automatic or inevitable about progress.

From reports of abuses in Canadian residential schools for Indigenous people, which were finally closed only twenty-five years ago, or reports of misconduct at Canadian schools for the blind, to reports of sexual harassment and assault at an NFB centre and event.

Recent revelations came out, whether it's military service members suffering abuse and harassment at the hands of their so-called superiors, or the anti-Asian racism that we've seen increase since the beginning of the pandemic – we, as blind people, many of us know what discrimination feels like, I think. So whether it might be visible or invisible disabilities, that too, make up our differences.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” So said James Baldwin.

So where do we start? In certain cases, we start with de-escalation, we start with accountability and we start with restorative justice. And by talking about these things and listening to others talk about intersectionalities they have, that's my best idea so far for how to deal with this.

Now I’d like to present to you the three panelists who will be speaking today. We have Sky Mundell, Jinnie Saran and Victoria Francis.

Welcome to this panel. This is Diversity and Intersectionality: In Their Own Words. And just to be clear about it, I am running this panel and I am a white Canadian woman with disabilities.

I wanted to get this panel together to talk about how we are blind people, but what else are we? We’re not just blind. So I’ve assembled some panelists here today that I wanted to talk to about this subject.

First, I wanted to start by you guys telling us who you are, in your own words. We'll start with Sky. Want to tell us about yourself, Sky?

Sky: Thank you. Hello, my name is Sky Mundell and I am thirty years old, from North Saanich, British Columbia, Canada. I was born with retinopathy of prematurity, which left me totally blind, as well as with a hearing impairment and also cerebral palsy, which affects my walking speed.
K: Walking speed. Yeah, because we're always talking about blindness at this convention, that's what we talk about, but one “intersectionality” is definitely our other disabilities. So people who are just blind may not always understand what that might be like.
So thanks for telling us about that, Sky. Okay, how about Jinnie? What would you say about yourself, in your own words?
Jinnie: Yeah, hello and thanks for having me on this panel.
As Kerry mentioned, my name is Jinnie. I am a 21-year-old university student. I’m currently studying to obtain my Bachelor of Arts, with a major in creative writing, a history minor and a journalism certificate. I was born with a condition called bilateral microphthalmia, so that's just when your eyes aren’t as fully developed. So I have been left totally blind as a result of that.

As well as blindness, I am also a part of the South Asian community. My parents were born in India and immigrated to Canada, and I was born here. I am also part of the LGBTQ community.

Outside of who I am, I also enjoy volunteering for blindness organizations and public speaking and doing advocacy.

K: Excellent. And Victoria, the third person on my panel?

Victoria: Hi everyone. My name is Victoria Francis. I am 35 years old, am completely blind due to retinopathy of prematurity, like Sky. And I identify as Indian-Canadian. My parents immigrated with my siblings and myself to Canada in 1992. After that, I have incorporated being a proud Canadian in my identity.

As an educational background, I have training in social work and psychology. And for a profession, I have worked in social work, providing counseling to clients. Right now, I enjoy spending time with friends and family and I am passionate about disability issues, as a woman with a disability.

K: Very good. Yeah, and that's the thing, we all have different degrees of these things and we all come to them at different times in our lives. And I wanted to have people on this panel from different age groups because in these issues, with what we're talking about today, there can be racism, there can be sexism, there can be ableism, many of us have dealt with these at different points in our lives.

So Sky, you were telling us about yourself. You train other blind people on technology, is that right?

S: Correct.

K: Right. So, with the three disabilities that you mentioned you have and the work you do with other students, what would you think people need to know about people like yourself and others who live with multiple disabilities?

S: Especially with being deaf. Speak clearly is the main thing. Speak clearly because there's all kinds of degrees of deafness. Mine is mild to moderate in one ear and moderate to severe in the other ear.

Yeah, so there's all types of degrees of hearing loss, ranging from mild to moderate to severe, even to critical and profound, all the way to totally deaf.

K: Right. Yeah, and that's the thing. I’ve been accused of talking fast a lot of times, and you don’t think about it until somebody like yourself mentions that. And talking to you, you are able to carry on conversations, so people might not know you are deaf.

S: Mmhmm.

K: Right. And of course, when you're meeting virtually, nobody would really know about the cerebral palsy and your walking issues that you do have.

S: Even cerebral palsy too, there's varying degrees, from mild to very severe. It can affect your speech as well. So mild being, you can walk and talk. Severe means you might be in a wheelchair and can talk. Or you might have problems speaking and in a wheelchair. Or sometimes you might walk fine but have problems speaking. So you never know with cerebral palsy what you’re gonna end up with.

K: Right, and it must be quite tricky to know how to teach different people who are at different levels and maybe with some different disabilities thrown in there also.

S: Well, I wouldn’t say it’s difficult – but the hearing is definitely a thing.
K: So, you use hearing aids?
S: Yeah.
K: Do they plug in, too? Everything is audio these days.
S: Correct. Yeah, I wear hearing aids and it’s all digital. I got a bluetooth device which connects into my phone that I use with the hearing aids when I go out traveling. The bluetooth device clips onto my collar.

As far as bluetooth and hearing aids when I’m using the computer, I don't use bluetooth on the hearing aids while on the computer, simply because when I use the screen reader there's a lagging delay between when I hit the keys and when the screen reader talks to me via bluetooth.

K: So Victoria, what has your work in social work these last years taught you, being like you said, a woman of different intersectionalities? What has it taught you about diversity, as far as working here in Canada and being Canadian?

V: Yeah, well, that's a great question, thank you for asking.

I have learned not to judge a book by its cover. And what I mean by that is, there could be more reasons than what initially meets the eye when somebody makes life decisions for themselves.

Before I undertook my study in psychology and social work, I was a pretty black and white thinker. I used to – I’m ashamed to even admit this now – but I used to be pretty judgmental about blind people. I used to wonder why they chose not to work. I used to wonder why people who are blind and otherwise seemingly healthy to me, why they weren't doing the things I thought they should be doing.

But I’ve learned that there could be many reasons why someone might be unemployed. For example, if somebody is blind and that’s their visible disability, but if they've got chronic health issues or some other invisible disability, like chronic pain or an autoimmune disease or anything, they might be unable to work or unable to live a life as we might traditionally think they should live.

So I’ve learned not to judge people and to try and understand that if someone does something in their life, they often have good reasons for doing it.

K: Well, it's great that you were able to come to that sort of realization, what you used to think and how you've evolved with that.

And of course, that’s the thing that people may think, “Well, we're blind, so we wouldn't have prejudgments on others and wouldn’t have prejudices in our community, as blind people.” And that's not true. I mean people have these prejudices for all kinds of reasons and luckily, a lot of people learn from that, as you say.

V: Yes. Absolutely.

K: So Jinnie, you said you're studying literature and you're big into all that. What do you think art and literature can do to bridge gaps in the marginalized communities themselves, like from multiple disabilities or from LGBTQ?

J: Yeah, I think we've seen this a lot. If you look at classic literature and if you look at books, that's what they begin taking a look at. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, that book became a huge classical literary text that, as a younger student, I definitely studied in school. And it's not just a story. It’s talking about the culture back in the time that the book took place.

And I think many books and art pieces are definitely doing that, but I think providing a space for authors who are from diverse backgrounds will allow that to further happen. And I know that sometimes there's been controversies when books don't have proper representation. I think working on that as well, having sensitivity readers, making sure that they are required for authors to be able to ask questions to, so making sure that the authors who are writing those books know about marginalized communities, so they’re not just writing people as stereotype within their works.

And I feel like when you're using art and literature to bridge the gap, it's not as intimidating. I know, like for me, when I’m confronted with a bunch of facts or someone just telling me all this information, I just can't take it in as well, because it kind of builds a lecture style in a way. And I feel like, with art and literature, it’s coupled with entertainment and it's coupled with interpretation, and it's not just cut and dry fact. It allows the reader or the person looking at the art to enter that world for a little bit and to actually get a more tangible sense of it.

K: Mmmhmm. Yes, and definitely I’m seeing a lot more museums and things making their exhibits more multifaceted, with different sensory aspects, so bridging that gap and bringing people into it. That's great.

So panel, tell us about which of your intersectionalities you maybe struggled most with in life.

We've talked to certain people since, like when Black Lives Matter started up again, some from the US, and some of them talked about being blind or being a person of colour – it must have been the community they grew up in – but their blindness was much more of an issue than the colour of their skin. That’s why we want to talk to everybody, to find out people's different experiences. That's why it's good to speak to a wide variety of people.

But, I guess Sky, we’ll start with you. You sort of already mentioned that, as far as your hearing impairment, that people don't realize how they have to talk. Would you say that is what affects you most, or?

S: Yeah. The hearing loss is definitely the one that affects me because, number one, if you ran into a situation where folks don't know that you have a hearing impairment, it can be very difficult for them to know how to talk to you, unless you run into someone that has had experience with deafness before. Fortunately, in my life, I found the folks who know about how to deal with folks who have hearing impairment.

K: Right. Well, how about you Victoria?

V: So, for me, interestingly, it's not the blindness, but it was a challenge growing up as a woman of colour, or a brown woman. Like Jinnie, I am also Indian.

My parents lived in Qatar and I was born there and we immigrated from there to here, but I am Indian by ethnicity. I often found growing up, and I find even now, that when people hear my name, Victoria Francis, they're like, “Oh, is that your real name?”

They’ll ask me things like that and I’ll say, “Yes, it's my real name.”

“Oh, how is that?” people will ask and I'll have to explain that my family grew up in a Christian region, and things like that. It can frankly get pretty exhausting. I try to be patient about it the best I can, but yes, this is my real name and I'm Christian. That's also a part of my identity, and I’m also Indian at the same time.

And the other thing people asked me growing up, and still now is, “Oh, how can English be your only language?”

I do realize that I speak with an accent and that leads people to believe that I may speak another language, but I do not, I just speak English. We grew up in a household of English only, and that's just hard for people to believe, but I guess, it’s just all the assumptions.

And although blindness is definitely a part of my identity, the part I struggle with most is the being a woman of colour and being asked all those questions.

K: Yeah, there's definitely always questions. What about you Jinnie?

J: I’d say, I do struggle with all three. Like Victoria, people have asked me, “Is Jinnie your real name?”

And for me, actually, it feels weird when I say no, because Jinnie is my nickname, my real name is Harjinder, and I feel like I’m just proving the stereotype. And like even, I have people, around the world and in my circle of friends, who don't support LGBTQ. But actually, for me, blindness is the most challenging of them all and I feel like that's because LGBTQ, I can keep that invisible. It is not something that is evident when you're looking at someone. Actually, let me take that back. It’s often not as evident when you're looking at someone, depending what part of that you identify with, right?

And South Asian, yes like, people are able to tell that I am a woman of colour. But I feel like racism and LGBTQ and all those things are talked about a lot. I’m not saying they shouldn’t be talked about or they shouldn't be talked about more, but I feel like disability is often ignored.

For me, in the classroom, we’ll always talk about LGBTQ, always talk about people of colour, but disability hardly comes up. So for me, I know if I have a racial experience, or if I have an LGBTQ experience, if I post about it, many people will talk about it. But I feel like, a blindness thing, it's just less common and less talked about, and if I post about it, the world is always divided about it.

K: Yeah. There's always one side or the other on a lot of issues. Yeah, no, I don't know much about the LGBTQ side of it, so I’m glad we could have you on the panel. I know you are very outgoing about all of that, so I’ve learned a lot from you so far. So what about Canada being considered, out in the world, such a multicultural country? Like you said, for you, you find disability doesn't get talked about enough?

What do you think about that, Sky? Do you think disability gets enough understanding?

S: Hmm. Well, what I can say with certainty, is that disability does tend to be overlooked from time to time. Like for instance, I seem to recall in my high school days, I, for a while, was in the mainstream. But then my aide had to leave the school and go work with someone else. And what happened was, I was with an aide that knew nothing about blindness, knew nothing about hearing loss, and all that. It was very hard being in a segregated environment in the school, in the resource room. And I'd go out and do trips, like coffee and Tim Hortons and go swimming and bowling and do recycling.

And they wouldn't let me in the music program, even though they clearly heard my piano playing.

K: Right. I was gonna ask everybody, since the theme of this convention is choices and goals. So I'm going to ask Sky, what choice do you think was big in your life, that made you, brought you to where you are now? Would you say it involved your piano playing?

S: Well, first thing, I've had a loving, supportive family. Remember, I'm adopted, so I had a supportive and loving family that gave me what I wanted and stuff. And yeah, my music. And just really enjoying life. And also, hard work and persistence.

K: Right. Yeah, all of that.

S: I'll be honest with people. When I left high school to go to university, I wasn't sure I could cope with being in the mainstream again. I wasn't sure if I could cope with it. You know, the funny thing is, when I went to apply for university, or when I got into university through an organization called the STEPS Forward Organization, which puts people with disabilities into university, what happened was, we had lots of fights. So my dad advocated and they said, "No, he wouldn't be good in university. He'd be much better off in a day program." And I actually remember that summer, when I graduated from high school, I had an aide that went with me to the day program on a tandem bike.

I remember when they actually heard my piano playing. One of the guys working at the day program said, "You do a really good job, Sky. I don't think you need to come to our program. You'd be much better off going somewhere like university."

K: Right. Awesome. Well, we've heard you play before on our podcast, Outlook On Radio Western, and you're great. Also for CFB events, so lovely.

S: Oh, my pleasure.

K: Thanks. So, Victoria, what kind of choice would you say has stood out in your life that's brought you to where you are? Also, if you want to say a goal that you have, that you're aiming for.

V: Yeah. So could I tell you one of each, Kerry?

K: Sure.

V: Okay, so the choice or the main choice, I think, that brought me to where I am, living the life that I am happy with, is the choice to meet or exceed the expectations that I set for myself as a blind person.

My parents brought me to this country. I was a child then, but the expectation was that I would hopefully live a quality life, which I wouldn't have been able to do back in Qatar, because of the lack of resources for training blind people, things like life skills. I don't think blind people had the opportunity to attend college or university back in India or Qatar. So, my choice was to set expectations for myself and to try and meet or exceed them.

And the goal that I have for myself, particularly for this year, I’m choosing to focus on becoming a more independent traveller. Orientation and mobility has been a challenge for me throughout my life and there could be a few reasons for that, but I didn't start to get training until later. And as a result, I didn't develop certain key concepts that I should have and that I would have liked to, such as spatial awareness, and things like that. My conscious goal for this year is to expand my horizons when it comes to travelling independently.

K: Great, yeah, that's one of my goals always also.

How about you Jinnie, a choice that maybe made you who you are, as far as your intersectionalities? Or a goal you have?

J: Oh, sure. Yeah, so a choice that I’ve made that really impacted me as well. First, I was very sheltered as a child. I didn't really see a lot of other blind kids, except once a year at summer camp. But, then I was introduced to a nonprofit called Blind Beginnings.

When I first joined Blind Beginnings, I remember looking at all the blind people and they were just doing things so independently and talking a lot to one another and it was super intimidating. But after joining and walking alongside them for, I don't know how long it's been. But since 2014, I’ve definitely become a more confident person and I think it’s their “no limits” philosophy.

So often when you have a disability, like blindness, society decides your limits for you, based on what they think you can and cannot do. And we believe that you should be the one deciding your own limits and so, we call it our “no limits” philosophy.

As for a goal I have – I know blind people, I know South Asian people and I know people who are part of the LGBTQ community, but I want to know more people who are like me and who crossover in some sectors. When I go to blindness events, I often feel like I’m one of the only South Asian people there. I don't really know that many South Asian blind people, unfortunately, or that many LGBTQ blind people, unfortunately, or who have all three. So I think my goal is definitely to find some crossovers and try to make connections as best I can.

K: Awesome. Thanks everybody for joining me. I’m going to wrap up. I just wanted to say that I often think, as we said, that disability does get mentioned sort of low on the list of minorities.

But if everybody is feeling a bit disconnected and small, one thought I had is that the more of us in marginalized communities who join together as we find each other's differences and learn about each other, that if we joined together, then you don't feel so small. You have more power in numbers that way. That's what I was thinking.

But I did want to end by asking the panelists – I have a friend who often talks to me about society and what they understand about different minorities, but she says, that to her ancestors and to her black and brown sisters and brothers, that "finding joy is an act of resistance". And I always liked that thought.

So maybe we'll end with everybody just quickly giving me an idea of what brings you joy, something that brings you joy? Start with you, Sky.

S: What brings me joy is playing the music and also recording it. And teaching, too.

K: Teaching. Right. Exactly, yeah, and you do great things with all of that.

How about you Victoria?

V: What brings me joy is making new friendships. I really enjoy getting to meet and talk to people.

K: Awesome, yeah. That's always great. We're discovering that in the last few years, all of us, I think. And how about you, Jinnie?

J: I think what brings me joy, and this might be a little counterintuitive, is to remember how much progress we have made. And that isn't to say that we should stop advocating and that things don't need to be fixed. There are things that we can still iron out. But I think, remembering that we're in 2021 and look how far we've come. I'm in university. You know, back in the day, people with disabilities weren't even allowed to do that. We're allowed to have some sort of autonomy. We can walk out into the street and walk wherever we want to go.

And I think sometimes we're so caught up in trying to advocate, and not that that's a bad thing, but that we forget all that we do have already as time has gone on and I think it's important to recognize that sometimes.

K: I agree. Sounds like a good place to end. Awesome. Thanks for coming today and speaking on all of these different things that make up who you are.

"Limits, like fears, are often just an illusion."
~ *Michael Jordan*

The Impact of CNIB’s 100-Year Monopoly on Blind Canadians

Speech presented by Daryl Jones
at the Canadian Federation of the Blind
‘Choices and Goals’ Virtual Convention, April 30 - May 2, 2021

Editor’s note: Daryl Jones is the author of “CNIB: Canada’s 100-Year Monopoly Report”, which he refers to in this speech as a “discussion paper” and “monopoly report”. To read the full report, see “The Blind Canadian”, Volume 18, Special Edition, on CFB’s website www.cfb.ca under Publications.

Good morning everyone.

My name is Daryl Jones and I am a friend and supporter of the CFB. I went to the University of Victoria where I got two BAs and an MA in Applied Economics.

Most of my working career was spent helping to manage British Columbia’s public sector pension funds. When I retired in 2013, we had $100 billion under our administration and I was the Senior Vice President of Research and Risk Measurement.

I am a sighted Canadian and wish to acknowledge at the outset of my talk that I have not had any direct personal dealings with the CNIB, or any of their staff or their volunteers. I am sure that over the past 103 years many fine and caring individuals have worked for the organization and undoubtedly they have helped many blind and visually-impaired Canadians.

So my criticism is not directed at CNIB’s line staff or their volunteers, but rather at Canada’s approach of relying on a single nonprofit company to provide critically important services for our blind citizens.

For most of my life I was like the vast majority of sighted Canadians and operated under the assumption that Canada’s blind were well served by the CNIB. It was only when I became friends with Doris and Oriano Belusic and other members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) that I came to realize how badly our approach was failing some blind Canadians.

An early surprise for me was learning that blind Americans generally receive much more help and support from their governments than blind Canadians receive from ours. I suspect, like most Canadians, my natural tendency is always to think that our social programs are superior to those of our neighbours to the south.

I think there are three main reasons why services for the blind are better in the United States. The first reason is the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and the tireless work of their founder and first President, Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, a truly remarkable man.

Dr. tenBroek helped to organize America's blind and turned them into a political force. Collectively they pushed their governments to improve their own lives, as well as the opportunities of those that followed in their footsteps.

The NFB's efforts lead me to the second reason why services for the blind are better in the United States: US governments have made helping the visually impaired their responsibility and part of America's social safety net. As a result, both their state and federal governments actively participate in helping their blind citizens adapt to life without eyesight.

In Canada, only Quebec has accepted the responsibility for providing training for its visually-impaired citizens. All of the other governments have failed to include services for the blind as part of Canada's social safety net. Instead, they have adopted a passive role and have simply given grants and lottery money to the CNIB and left it to that single nonprofit company to both determine and look after the diverse needs of Canada's blind.

A clear example of the difference between the two countries can be seen in library services. Blind Americans have access to a very large collection of accessible reading material, both through their state governments and through their federal government, including the Library of Congress. Canada, on the other hand, has largely relied on CNIB and then its offspring, the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA), to provide accessible reading material for Canadians with print disabilities.

Although accessible content has improved in recent years, we still have a highly inequitable library system. Canadians with print disabilities only have access to a small fraction of the reading materials that are available to sighted library users or that are available to Americans with print disabilities.

The third reason for differences between Canada and the US is that blind Americans have choices when it comes to their service providers. Visually-impaired Americans can go to a government-funded training centre or they can get public funding to attend a private centre run by a nonprofit. At its 2020 convention, the NFB reported that over 200 private organizations provide services for America's visually impaired.

A competitive environment encourages organizations to be innovative, efficient and client-focused.

Giving all of the public money allocated to help the blind to a single organization has effectively given the CNIB a government-sanctioned national monopoly over providing services for the blind. This, combined with CNIB's aggressive public fundraising campaigns, means that virtually all of the money intended to help Canada's blind ends up in CNIB's coffers.

Not surprisingly, the end result is that the CNIB is the only option for most visually-impaired Canadians, when it comes to learning the skills and gaining the self confidence that are needed for living independently, finding gainful employment and enjoying a full life. Having a government-endorsed monopoly for 103 years has enabled the CNIB to grow into one of the largest and most influential nonprofit companies in the country.

They have a well-paid executive, a staff of about 1,000 and 50 offices, half of which are in Ontario. According to CNIB's T3010 Charity Return, the company spent $48 million on staff compensation in 2018. Total expenditures in that year were about $79 million. The company received $32 million in grants from governments and another $10 million in lottery and gaming revenue.

Large longstanding monopolies have never been a good thing for consumers. Ask any Canadian who is old enough to remember what it was like dealing with the phone and cable companies when landlines were the only game in town. Long distance prices were outrageous, the organizations were bureaucratic nightmares to deal with, and the service was crappy. However, consumers basically had two choices: they could use the local phone and cable companies or they could go without these services.

The companies had little reason to change what they had been doing for decades as they had captive clients and their prices and profits were regulated. While Canadian consumers still have lots of gripes with their phone and cable companies, we now have some choice and, believe me, services and prices are much better today.

But that is the way things are supposed to work. Competition is supposed to be the foundation of our free market consumer-driven economy.

The federal government has long recognized the importance of competition and ever since the 1920s there has been federal legislation designed to encourage competition and combat monopolies. The federal government has also created the

Competition Bureau to serve as an independent law enforcement agency to administer and enforce Canada's Competition Act.

The following passages come from the Competition Bureau of Canada's website and explain why competition is important for consumers:

> Competition in the marketplace is good for Canadians. Competition benefits Canadians by keeping prices low and keeping the quality and choice of products and services high. With fair and vigorous competition, businesses must produce and sell the products consumers want, and offer them at prices they are willing to pay.
>
> This means that in a competitive market, the consumer holds the power.
>
> When there is limited competition and consumer choice, businesses can dictate their terms. This can lead to businesses offering products and services that are too expensive, of low quality, or lacking features that consumers want. Without competition, consumers must accept these inferior products and services, or go without.
>
> However, when businesses operate in a healthy competitive market, consumers get to choose the best option available to meet their needs and price point. Fair competition means that businesses must make a strong case to each consumer, and convince them that their products or services are the superior choice. This translates to more and better products and services that meet the diverse range of consumer tastes. In short, more variety, more features, higher quality and more value for consumers.
>
> As consumer preferences invariably shift, a competitive market will reflect these changes in the products and services it delivers. This will push businesses that excelled at meeting yesterday's needs to either adapt or fall behind because of pressures from existing competitors or new entrants in the marketplace.
>
> When markets only have one or very few sellers, consumers may not even realize what they are missing. In a competitive market, new entrants or existing businesses continuously innovate and improve productivity to offer consumers better products and services at lower prices.
>
> Together with Canada's policy-makers, it is the Competition Bureau's responsibility to protect competitive markets and help ensure that we all experience the full benefits of healthy competition.

So there is widespread recognition that consumers benefit from a competitive marketplace and are poorly served by monopolies – except it seems, when it comes to providing services for the blind. Strangely, in this one area, sighted Canadians and their governments seem to automatically assume that blind consumers are best served by a single national monopoly!

Another surprise in my blindness education came from learning that despite receiving hundreds of millions, if not billions, from governments over the past century, the CNIB does not operate a single residential training centre in the country. A centre where young adults and working-age blind Canadians can stay for 9 to 12 months and work daily with highly qualified instructors to develop skills and self-confidence to achieve the life they want.

Apparently intensive residential training programs in the United States have good track records in helping working-age blind Americans gain increased independence and in finding paid employment. I have met and read the stories of several Canadians who have been lucky enough to attend such training centres in the US and each of them have reported that it was a life-changing experience. Attending the Louisiana Center for the Blind even inspired Elizabeth Lalonde to start the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind here in Victoria, one of the few small competitors to CNIB's training monopoly.

It appears to me, that the CNIB has been operating under the same delivery model for many decades. Specifically, it provides services to the blind through its staff and volunteers in its regional offices.

I've been told that the amount of training and support that a blind person receives depends upon many factors, including the person's proximity to the nearest CNIB office, the office's workload, how many years the person has been visually impaired, the quality of the local staff and volunteers, and the amount of funding the CNIB receives from the provincial or territorial government.

The key point is, there is no national standard, but rather, it is left to each office to determine the level of service they are able to provide to their local blind customers with their allotted time and resources.

I have heard many more complaints rather than positive reviews about CNIB's training and its bureaucracy. However, one of my former colleagues did tell me that he and his family had a very positive experience with the corporation. His elderly mother lost her eyesight late in life and their staff and volunteers helped to make her last few years more comfortable. He was particularly grateful that they introduced her to talking books, as they became her primary source of entertainment.

It appears to me, as an outside observer, that CNIB's services have traditionally been geared towards their elderly clients. This makes some sense because most Canadians who lose their eyesight do so late in life. It is also much easier and less expensive to address the needs of the elderly.

Even better, assisting the elderly can be financially rewarding, as CNIB has historically received many large donations from the wills and estates of its grateful patrons. In fact, it took two full pages in CNIB's latest annual report just to list the 150 or so estates that have left gifts to the corporation.

Obviously, the training needs of a 20-year old blind person with a lifetime ahead of them are fundamentally different and more complex than those of a 90-year old.

As I understand it, most young and working-age blind Canadians receive limited help from the CNIB.

I've heard estimates of unemployment among the working-age blind range from 70–90%, although you wouldn't know that this was a problem if you looked at CNIB's website.

On their website, the corporation reports their work programs will "provide you with skills and resources to attain your career ambitions, thrive academically at every stage and hone your abilities as an entrepreneur or mentor." I've been told that the reality is that the vast majority of working-age blind Canadians will give up looking for paid employment and struggle to make ends meet, living on disability assistance. This, of course, assumes that their living arrangements don't disqualify them from being eligible to collect disability assistance.

But I digress – so, getting back to the story of the monopoly report.

Nonprofit companies aren't exempt from the Competition Act. In fact, the definition of business in the Competition Act explicitly states that it includes businesses that "raise funds for charitable and other nonprofit purposes." This led me to believe that the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) had grounds to complain to the Competition Bureau about CNIB's market domination over fundraising and in providing services for the blind.

I discussed the idea with Mary Ellen Gabias and some other members of the CFB executive and received their support to write a discussion paper in support of a CFB complaint to the Competition Bureau. The executive was very helpful and provided me feedback and comments on various drafts. Our hope was the Competition Bureau would look into the matter and write an independent policy paper on whether blind Canadians were being well served by Canada's reliance on a single national corporation.

Much of the background information in the monopoly report came from my involvement in the CFB and listening to the stories of blind Canadians. It was supplemented by public information available on the Internet, such as reports from major media outlets. A lot came from CNIB's own website. There is lots of information on their website, if you can get past the marketing and corporate branding.

I also read Graeme McCreath's book, *The Politics of Blindness*, and of course, CFB's *The Blind Canadian* magazine was also a valuable resource. It was easy to find some good historical information in *The Blind Canadian*.

In some ways, the CNIB resembles a traditional monopoly, similar to those I studied in my undergraduate economic classes. I can recall a favourite professor of mine, Dr. Colin Jones, no relation to me, telling our class that the number one goal of all monopolies was to protect the status quo and their market share.

One key way that the CNIB protects its market share is through aggressive fundraising and sucking up all of the money allocated to help the blind. According to Charity Intelligence Canada, a donor information company, in 2019 CNIB spent over $12 million on its fundraising efforts and they received $24.7 million in donations from the public. That means that for every dollar donated to the CNIB, the company spent 49 cents on fundraising. After taking off another 5 cents for administration, that leaves only 46 cents available for their causes.

In its most recent annual report, the CNIB states that only 21% of their revenue goes to fundraising and 3% for administration. This obviously is a big difference from what Charity Intelligence Canada is reporting. I assume that the difference is because CNIB based their calculation on total revenue, which also includes government grants, lottery money and profits made from CNIB's business operations, its investments and the selling of properties. Charity Intelligence Canada, on the other hand, based its calculation on fundraising costs relative to charitable donations.

From a monopolist perspective, CNIB's dominance over both government grants and private fundraising creates an enormous barrier to entry for someone like Elizabeth who wants to operate a competing nonprofit service. CNIB's fundraising campaigns serve another purpose as well. Fundraising helps maintain CNIB's brand and reinforces the image in the mind of the general public, that they are looking out for the interests of the blind. Maintaining public support for the CNIB is mission critical for protecting the status quo.

Over the past six months, I have seen CNIB's guide dog commercials at least 30 or 40 times on a wide variety of TV shows and networks. I've seen them run on CTV, Global, Food Network and CNN. I even saw one of their ads on the Home and Garden channel on a TV screen while I was at my dentist's office.

I'll talk some more about these commercials a little later. For now, the key point is that these fundraising campaigns help protect the status quo by reassuring the public that the CNIB is out there looking after the needs of the blind, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CNIB behaves like a traditional monopoly, in that it tries to capture all of the revenue opportunities available in the value chain. The CNIB established the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA), another nonprofit company, to lend out its historic library, and this affiliated company continues to be the dominant source of accessible reading material for Canada's libraries. CELA receives grant money from governments to increase its accessible content and then charges provincial governments and municipal libraries for the rights to lend its private library to their print-disabled citizens.

The establishment of CELA is an instance where CNIB used its monopoly muscle to impose a model that had been rejected by stakeholder groups. Therefore, I thought it would be beneficial to explain the story in a little more detail in support of a CFB complaint to the Competition Bureau.

I will refer you to the monopoly report for the full story, but I will provide an overview for those who are not aware of the story of CELA's creation. Canadians with print disabilities have traditionally been poorly served by the public library system. It was particularly bad for Canadians who were print disabled for reasons other than vision loss, as the only way that they could access CNIB's historic collection was through partnership agreements and inter-library loans.

In 2007, the federal government attempted to address the problems facing print-disabled Canadians by creating the Initiative for Equitable Library Access (IELA). During the initial IELA public consultations, it was apparent that there was a lot of dissatisfaction with users' access to accessible material, as well as CNIB's involvement in the public library system.

There was also hope among many of the stakeholder groups that the federal government would follow the US lead and would establish the Library and Archives Canada as a coordinating body for Canadians with print disabilities. However, the federal government quickly quashed that idea and threw its support behind a proposal made by the CNIB where it would set up a separate nonprofit company and use it as a central hub for the production and distribution of material for all print-disabled Canadians.

While the federal government and a hired consultant attempted to sell CNIB’s proposal, there was strong pushback from the key stakeholder groups. User groups wanted a publicly-funded, publicly-run and publicly-accountable library system. They saw CNIB’s proposal as merely dressing up the status quo. Provincial librarians wanted a system that was consistent with standard library principles; while provincial governments, who are the primary funders of library services, wanted a governance structure that was accountable to provincial authorities, not to a nonprofit’s Board of Directors.

Recognizing there was strong and unified opposition against CNIB’s proposal, Library and Archives Canada abruptly ended the IELA initiative.

Despite its failure, the federal government continued to support CNIB’s model and in 2011 the government reportedly made a one-time grant of $7 million to the CNIB in support of its accessible library services. The failure of the federal government’s initiative, combined with an abrupt and significant increase in CNIB’s lending fees, prompted librarians from several provinces to come together and establish the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS).

NNELS was launched in December 2013 as a repository of accessible material, where the content would be owned and sustained by Canadian public libraries.

If the CNIB wanted to maximize the public benefit from its historic collection, it could have simply donated it to NNELS and Canada’s public libraries. This would have allowed for the widest possible distribution of accessible material to print-disabled Canadians at the lowest cost to taxpayers. It would have been entirely appropriate given that most of the money that was used to build and digitize CNIB’s collection came from the various levels of government.

However, five months after NNELS’ launch, the CNIB proceeded with its proposal that had been rejected by the stakeholders. Specifically, CNIB established the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) to provide a national library service for all print-disabled Canadians. Although CELA was created as a nonprofit corporation, make no mistake, it is in the business of providing accessible content to print-disabled Canadians on a subscription basis.

Although some Canadian libraries initially resisted paying higher borrowing fees to the CNIB, most acquiesced to CELA. In reality, they had little choice. Failure to pay CELA’s fees not only meant that their disabled members would be denied access to

CNIB's historic collection, it also was a PR nightmare for the libraries, as both disabled members and the CNIB complained loudly to media outlets about the loss of content.

Today, according to CELA, it is fully funded to serve 97% of the estimated three million Canadians with print disabilities. I found it difficult to find out much about CELA's finances with Internet searches or from its website. However, I did find out that in 2017, Vancouver's Public Library paid $43,693 to CELA and in the same year, Surrey Public Library paid $31,702 to CELA.

These are two large municipalities in BC, but remember this is a national service where taxpayers have largely already paid for the content.

The political clout of the CNIB is illustrated by the fact that in recent years the federal government has given $3 million to CELA to increase the size of its collection and only $1 million to NNELS. So the federal government is giving CELA three times as much funding as it gives to NNELS, despite the fact that NNELS is owned by the library system and does not charge rental fees to municipal libraries.

I cannot say I understand such a policy from a taxpayer perspective but think it illustrates the political clout of the CNIB, particularly with the federal government.

In addition to dominating training, rehabilitation, employment and library services, CNIB is also a big player in the retail market and reportedly serves over 15,000 customers per year. When I wrote the monopoly report, their retail operation was called Shop CNIB, but the name has recently been rebranded to CNIB SMARTLIFE, your one-stop accessibility shop.

SMARTLIFE's prices are as high, if not higher than other retailers, but this they consider okay because any profits the company makes from selling products to their blind customers goes back to the corporation and supports its programs and, of course, the salaries of its staff.

SMARTLIFE staff members are called coaches and apparently they operate out of SMARTLIFE Centres, which I assume is your local CNIB office. The coaches will help you find and learn how to use the products that they will be happy to sell to you.

One thing a traditional monopoly will do to protect its market domination is to acquire any pesky competitors that are successfully encroaching on their turf. If you cannot beat them, then buy them, which of course, the CNIB did when it acquired Frontier Computing, a leading supplier of assistive technologies for the visually impaired.

I have recently been told that the CNIB is using the leverage that it gained from its acquisition of Frontier Computing to negotiate exclusive distribution rights with some manufactures. Significantly, the CNIB even brags out these exclusive arrangements on SMARTLIFE's website.

The corporation says and I quote: "We're proud to have exclusive partnerships with some of Canada's most innovative assistive technology and product makers, meaning we offer many cutting-edge tools you won't find anywhere else."

I can see how an exclusive partnership benefits the CNIB's retail operation but what are the supposed benefits for blind consumers? Without competition from other retail sellers, the prices for those products will inevitably increase and that hurts the blind consumer in their pocket book. You either pay CNIB's price or go without.

Of course CNIB's exclusive arrangements with manufactures also hurt other retailers of accessible products. They can no longer sell product lines that they have had for years and this hurts their sales and profitability. In the long-run, exclusivity arrangements will result in fewer businesses selling accessible products and technologies, and clearly the last thing that blind Canadians need is less competition.

The CNIB was late entering into the guide dog business as it only graduated its first six dogs in November 2018. However, the company now appears to be jumping into the market in a big way and certainly has made their guide dog program the driving force in this year's fundraising efforts. It's hard for me to believe that the CNIB won't have a lock on the domestic guide dog market in the next few years.

In some ways the CNIB is an archetype monopoly, but in other ways it is unique and very different from any of the monopolies we studied in Dr. Jones' class on Industrial Organization.

One thing that blows my mind is how many hats the company wants to wear at the same time. Not only does the CNIB have a monopoly over providing services for the blind, but it is also a self-appointed advocate and public spokesperson for blind Canadians, as well as being a major researcher on blindness-related issues.

So the company is a monopolistic supplier, lead researcher, consumer advocate and public spokesperson, all for the same group of citizens. Would the CNIB ever push governments to include services for the blind in Canada's social safety net and argue that it should be a provincial government responsibility to provide training, rehabilitation and employment services for its visually-impaired citizens?

Would the CNIB support or oppose a provincial government wanting to establish a state-of-the-art residential training facility that was to be managed by a different nonprofit corporation?

Would the CNIB ever warn governments that relying on one company to provide critical services to a group of disabled citizens was effectively putting all of their eggs in one basket and the lack of supplier diversification was a risky strategy from a public policy perspective?

Would the CNIB ever argue that the blind would benefit from having choices rather than a monopoly when it came to training and rehabilitation services?

Would the CNIB ever issue a public statement arguing that it is deplorable that currently there are no residential training facilities outside of Quebec or would they publicly acknowledge that services for the blind are superior in the US?

Would the CNIB ever donate their historic book collection to Canada's libraries and then push governments to ensure they provide a more equitable library service for print-disabled Canadians?

Each of the above would benefit blind Canadians, but at the expense of the CNIB's empire and the status quo.

The fact that the interests of the corporation may differ or conflict with the interests of its clients is one reason why no company, not even a nonprofit, should ever be both a monopolistic supplier and consumer advocate for the same group of people. The CNIB reports on its website that advocacy work represents 15.82% of cause-related expenses.

Certainly CNIB has a strong lobby and presence in Ottawa. It is asked regularly for comments on federal and provincial legislation that affects the disabled. As a general rule, any government board or panel set up to examine an issue affecting the disabled will include a CNIB representative.

However, where is the CNIB when it comes to the thorny advocacy issues, such as fighting with city halls over bike lanes that are making it unsafe for blind citizens to use regular public transit? What have they done to demand that all Canadian transit authorities call out bus stops so that blind consumers can rely on taking regular public transportation? What have they done to stop the ever-increasing problem of taxi or UBER drivers refusing to pick up passengers with guide dogs? How many human rights complaints have they supported in the last 5 or 10 years?

CNIB relies on regular annual funding from the public and governments and you don’t bite the hands that feed you. Nor are you interested in rocking the boat when you are a monopoly and your number one goal is to maintain the status quo.

Unfortunately, CNIB’s passive approach to advocacy means that, in many respects, things are getting worse for blind Canadians, not better. While CNIB has continued to expand its business empire, services that the agency provided for many decades and that benefited thousands of blind children, like Camp Bowen, have actually ceased operation.

I think the CNIB’s current television commercials are clear examples of why the company should have no role in being an advocate for the blind. In one commercial, a young blind woman is portrayed to be afraid to leave her house because she doesn’t have a guide dog. In the second CNIB commercial, a young blind woman appears to be unable to cross the street at a pedestrian-controlled crosswalk because all she has is an empty guide dog harness.

I appreciate that some people depend on their guide dogs for their independence and mobility. However, do these commercials represent the public image of blindness that you want to portray to sighted Canadians? Blind people in their 20’s, unable to leave their homes or cross a street without a guide dog?

Portraying the blind as hapless individuals in TV commercials may help with CNIB’s fundraising efforts and their corporate branding, but I can’t believe it will help a young person find an employer who is willing to take a chance on hiring a blind employee.

CNIB is a nonprofit company and so there are no owners or shareholders who expect to be compensated for their capital investment and for taking business risks. However, being a nonprofit is a double-edged sword, as the downside of not having any owners is that it also removes a layer of governance and accountability.

The management team in a for-profit company is accountable for their results to the owners and to a Board of Directors, who are appointed or elected by the owners to represent their interest. If the owners are unhappy with the results or direction of the company, they will fire both the board and the management team.

As a nonprofit company, there are no owners watching CNIB’s corporate results or peeking over management’s shoulder to make sure they are doing a good job. Nor is there an Auditor General to conduct a value-for-money audit or issue public comments on whether the organization is achieving Canada’s social goals in terms of helping the blind gain greater independence.

Instead, as a nonprofit, CNIB's management team assesses their own firm's performance and, like many charities, they rely on personal success stories and anecdotal evidence to show a positive impact. Of course, CNIB does have a Board of Directors but, from a governance perspective, there is a significant difference between a volunteer sitting on a nonprofit board and someone who has a personal financial interest in making sure the company is well managed and delivers its services in a cost-effective manner.

On its website, CNIB describes its Board as follows:

"The CNIB Foundation's National Board of Directors is made up of some of Canada's brightest minds and most successful industry leaders. Each is a dedicated advocate for the rights of Canadians who are blind or partially sighted, with many members living with blindness or significant sight loss themselves."

Currently, there are 21 members on CNIB's National Board of Directors, which is a large board. I had considerable experience dealing with Boards of Trustees during my career as a pension fund manager and smaller boards were generally more focused and asked tougher questions of our management team. According to the Wall Street Journal, the optimal size of a Board of Directors is between 5 and 7. Other groups that focus on governance argue for between 8 to 10 Directors, depending upon the complexity.

Anyway, returning to the monopoly report – we finished writing it early in 2020.

Unfortunately, that was the same time as COVID-19 began disrupting all of our lives and became everyone's only focus. Initially, Mary Ellen and the CFB executive thought it would be best to wait until things got back to normal.

However, after a few months it became clear that COVID wasn't going away. Therefore, Mary Ellen submitted the monopoly report and a letter of complaint to the Competition Bureau on behalf of the CFB. Initially, we had a conference call with a couple of Competition Officers. They look for specific instances where a company has violated specific sections of the Act, such as engaging in uncompetitive business practices or false advertising. However, they mentioned that another group in their organization did policy papers on compensation issues and promised to forward our report to them.

When we did not hear back, Mary Ellen sent a letter and copy of the report directly to the Head of the Competition Bureau.

The Competition Commissioner sent back a diplomatic response noting that their usual role in advocacy was suggesting regulatory or legislative changes to foster improved competition. He saw the CFB complaint as involving a broader set of public policy questions surrounding the needs of blind Canadians and felt it was outside their mandate. He did, however, recognize and appreciate the concerns and encourage the CFB to bring up these issues with government officials who have direct responsibility for accessibility.

CFB executive followed the Commissioner's suggestion and forwarded 21 copies of the monopoly report to government officials and ministers across the country. There were a few polite responses, but no one promised meaningful change.

So where do we stand. Who will be the agents of change?

One thing is for sure: it won't be the CNIB. Like all monopolies, they will fight tooth and nail to maintain the status quo. Their professional and management staff are well compensated. In fact, recently Mary Ellen posted to the CFB's list, the names of 32 of CNIB's staff members in Ontario who make more than $100,000 per year. Their management staff enjoys a high level of job security and many of their long-time employees are eligible to receive a monthly pension that is guaranteed by the company in their retirement.

So the CNIB and their staff are clearly looking forward to another century of providing services to Canada's blind and advocating on their behalf.

Governments are also unlikely to be the agents of change. First of all, politicians and the financial bureaucrats believe that it costs government less to let a charity look after the needs of the blind. I would argue that this is being shortsighted on their part. Better skills training and employment services would mean that more blind people would be working and paying taxes, rather than sitting at home collecting disability assistance.

However, another reason why governments support the status quo is because the general public holds the CNIB in high regard. Politicians are afraid of criticizing the CNIB out of concern of how their constituents might react, and that such criticism might hurt them at the ballot box.

The media are also leery of criticizing a Canadian institution that many of their paying subscribers view as a sacred cow. It seems to be a story that people don't want to hear. Many CFB supporters have told me that it is difficult to get letters or articles critical of CNIB published in newspapers, and certainly I have also experienced this.

In fact, after completing the monopoly report, I wrote an article on CNIB's monopoly, submitted it to eight or nine national papers and magazines, but none were interested in publishing it. Although I find this personally frustrating, I can understand their reluctance to publish my article. All of these papers and magazines have written glowing stories about the CNIB and are reluctant to now publish a critical article, written by a sighted person whom they don't know and has zero social media presence.

As I mentioned at the outset, the NFB was the agent of change in the United States and I believe that if meaningful change is ever going to come to Canada, it will be because of the work of the CFB. The CFB is the only blind advocacy group that is militant enough to publicly say that our current approach of relying on the CNIB is failing many blind Canadians.

The CFB is likely the only advocacy group that will argue that services for the blind should be a government responsibility and not left to a national charity. Certainly there are roles for nonprofits in providing training services but there should be a competitive environment with government oversight, not a national monopoly where the basically one and only service provider gets to decide what is the appropriate level of service and training.

I appreciate that militancy does not come naturally to us Canadians and the term itself turns some people off. However, sometimes a little militancy is required if you want things to change.

I also appreciate that many blind and visually-impaired people are uncomfortable in criticizing the CNIB, as they are the only agency that has helped them. Sadly, I have also met some who are afraid to publicly criticize the CNIB out of concern that they may need the corporation's help in the future.

I can certainly understand those positions. No company has greater control over the lives of some of its citizens. However, if blind Canadians are willing to bite their lip and tacitly accept the status quo, I fear little will ever change for the better. Too many influential people have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and the forces of inertia are very strong, as demonstrated by CNIB's longevity.

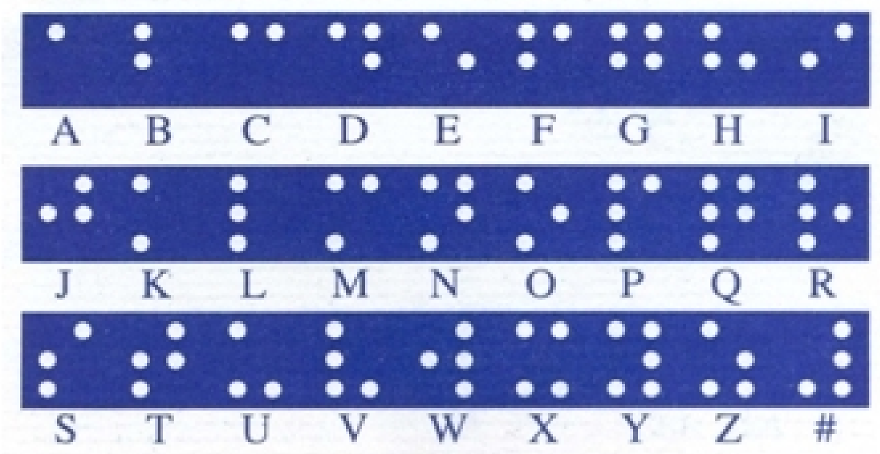
I am hoping that you, new members of the CFB, will become the agents of change, not only for yourselves but also for those that will ultimately follow in your footsteps. One of the most important things you can do is to follow Dr. tenBroek's lead and go out and actively recruit more members to the organization, people who are willing to stand up and say that the status quo is not good enough and that it is time governments include services for the blind in Canada's social safety net.

The bigger the CFB becomes, the bigger will be your voice and the harder it will be for politicians and the media to ignore you. You will need allies – people from NNELS, sellers of accessible equipment and guide dog schools are all adversely affected by CNIB's monopoly.

As for myself, I will continue to try to get media outlets to investigate the issues and concerns that were flagged in the monopoly report and that I have discussed here today. Public support is the cornerstone in maintaining CNIB's monopoly and it is important that the sighted public come to realization that just because the CNIB and CELA provide services to the blind, doesn't automatically make them worthy of being hoisted onto a pedestal.

Braille Literacy Canada

Speech by BLC President Natalina Martiniello
presented at the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)
'Choices and Goals' Virtual Convention, April 30 – May 2, 2021



The Braille Alphabet

Hi everyone and thank you for inviting me to be here today.

My name is Natalina Martiniello and I am the President of Braille Literacy Canada, the Canadian Braille Authority. Outside of BLC, just to tell you a little about myself, I work at the University of Montreal where I focus very heavily on Braille literacy, in particular the learning and use of Braille in adulthood, which we don't talk about enough. Above all else, like many of you, I am a lifelong Braille reader and I'm very passionate about Braille because I'm passionate about literacy.

Many people ask us within BLC about why Braille matters and why we talk about Braille differently than we talk about other methods to access information. As many of you know firsthand, it is because Braille really is that vehicle through which literacy can really flourish. I, like many of you, use multiple methods to read and write, but it is really Braille that truly granted me a sense of literacy and it was Braille that I really always attached to those empowering, powerful and validating memories from my early life. It's Braille that I really consider to be the reason why I've been able to accomplish the things I have, as many of you, I know, feel the same way.

So I know that I'm preaching to the choir and the truth is that before Braille, blind people could not really read or write, and we relied entirely on others. With the dawn of Braille literacy, blind people were finally educated. We moved from manual tasks to more academic subjects and this represented a true turning point in our story as blind people. It elevated us from a state of charity and reliance on others to a life where we could truly strive towards our goals and have a more meaningful life in society.

That's why we talk about Braille differently because Braille brought with it education, and both higher levels of employment and a dignity that we really didn't have beforehand. Other technologies helped to level the playing field, as many of you know, and in fact increased access to Braille, but it really is Braille that opened that door.

So despite the fact that we all know these things to be true, I, like many of you, and certainly Braille Literacy Canada, so often are asked whether Braille is still important. We feel that this tells us more about what others think about blindness than what they think about Braille. This question would never be asked of print. So it speaks to the often unconscious biases and lower expectations that too often are attached to blindness, and disability in general.

We understand that in a sighted world, being literate is a prerequisite to true participation and gainful employment. This fact does not change when that mode of literacy shifts from visual to tactile. If we understand that literacy is a right for the sighted, then it is for the blind as well. You each know this to be true, of course. But I say this to give you some insight as to why we are so passionate about what we do within BLC and why it's so important to support our mandate.

Through BLC we provide the Canadian Braille community with an opportunity to come together to have a united voice. Over the next few minutes, I'd like to tell you a little more about BLC, who we are, what we do, and how you can get involved. We are always very empowered about partnerships, working with other individuals and organizations to share our mandate, to support the use of Braille for anyone who can benefit from it. We do this through public education and a variety of other initiatives.

First, who are we? Braille Literacy Canada, the Canadian Braille Authority, was established in 1990, so we recently celebrated our 30th anniversary. We are above all else the governing authority for Braille in Canada. What that means is that BLC, as an organization, is a member of the International Council of English Braille (ICEB), which consists of the Braille Authorities from all English-speaking countries. As a member of BLC, you have the opportunity to have a voice on the international stage and vote on vital international Braille code issues. For example, it was through BLC that Canada voted in favour to adopt Unified English Braille in 2010.

Our members consist of Braille users at any level, Braille transcribers, parents of blind children, proofreaders, anyone with a passion for literacy through Braille. Membership costs $20 per year and runs along with the calendar year, so begins in January. You can also, as a corporate organization, become a member of BLC.

I’d like to talk to you a little about our member benefits, some of the initiatives that we work on. We publish a bi-monthly newsletter that consists of Braille-related news from within Canada and internationally, other important updates on the Braille code, and articles that are just generally of interest to the Braille community. You can contribute articles in English or French, whether you are or are not a member of BLC. The newsletter is sent by email to all members and is also available in hard copy Braille through partnership with CELA.

Through our Braille Promotions committee we run a number of social media campaigns that last for a few years in a row. The word Braille, #Braille, actually trended on Twitter for World Braille Day in Canada, which is very exciting for those of you who know about social media. We also run bi-monthly workshops on Braille-related themes that are of interest to our different member groups, such as if you are a parent wanting to know more about how to support your child in the area of Braille literacy, or a Braille user.

We recently held a joint session with both CELA and NNELS about funding for library services which, as I’m sure you all know, is of primary concern at the moment. And we are always interested to know about other themes that may be of interest to the Braille community.

Our French Braille committee is also active putting together resources on the learning of French Braille in Canada. We also translated the Braille coding rule book into French. We are actually in the process of launching a new program which will provide financial assistance to purchase French print-Braille books for children across Canada. We’re very excited about this, so stay tuned to learn more. We’ve started this thanks to a lot of generous donors, but also recognizing that there are so few materials in French print-Braille as well.

The Edie Mourre Scholarship recognizes and celebrates one of our past members who was heavily involved as a transcriber and member. Through this scholarship program we support anyone in Canada who wants to become a Braille transcriber or proofreader or who is pursuing a career in Braille instruction to become a Braille educator or teacher of students with visual impairment (TVI). We’re actually in the process of reviewing applications for this year and will be announcing the recipients at our AGM in June. This program launches every January, so stay tuned if that’s of interest to you.

Our Brailler Bounce program was initiated by Myra Rodriguez who is a longtime member and through this program we repair braillers, over 60 braillers to date, and we loan them to Braille readers across Canada at no charge to either the donors or the recipients. If you have a Brailler that you are not using, well, first of all, start using it – but if you’re really not using it and you’d like to donate it, let us know. Or if you need a brailler, let us know as well.

We’re very excited about our Braille Zoomers program. Through this program we provide peer support to adults and seniors who are learning Braille, who are thinking about Braille, or who learned it at some time in adulthood.

As many of you know, there is a misconception that older adults are too old to learn Braille. But the truth is that often what prevents people from learning Braille later on in life is the stigma that is attached to Braille as a symbol of blindness and the intimidation of learning something new later on in life. So we really need to crack through that, to show people that Braille is actually an empowering tool that will increase your independence.

Through this program we meet virtually once a month to provide peer support, provide that vital network for adult Braille learners to communicate with each other, to learn from one another, to share tips and resources, which is often lacking at the adulthood level when you are learning Braille.

I do want to emphasize that in the Braille Zoomers program, we’re not trying to replace traditional Braille instruction in whatever form that might take, and that’s because we believe very strongly that Braille instruction should be supported through government funding, not through a charity. What we are trying to do though, is provide that vital link through peer support. We also run a listserv for adult and senior Braille learners.

And, we are very excited about the Braille starter kits that we're starting to provide to all of our Braille Zoomer participants that contains really important and useful Braille items like a stylus, flash cards, all kinds of fun things to help you on your Braille journey. We're actually in the process of providing some of those to the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind as well.

I'd like to close with a quote from one of our past presidents, Dr. Euclid Herie, who I think expressed very well the lasting legacy of Braille literacy, and he wrote:

"And so I say to you now, that if you would seek a memorial to Louis Braille, look about you. Whenever a blind person reads, two hands sliding gracefully across the page of Braille text, there is the living memorial to Louis Braille."

Q from the audience:

Two questions: I know that the issue of children learning Braille or being denied the ability to learn Braille is an issue, but I don't know the specifics. So I'm interested if that's something you're familiar with, if you could comment on it. Also, are there other advocacy-related issues regarding Braille that is a concern to BLC?

A: First, the situation for blind children. I think there are a lot of different reasons why not everyone has access to Braille literacy, which is a very, very significant problem, as we all know. It's a complicated answer. Some of what goes into this is that there is a lack of qualified teachers, so that's one part of it. We need to keep making people aware of these career paths, especially if you are a Braille reader. I think it's really empowering when blind children see firsthand examples of how Braille and other things can really empower their lives. So, that's one part of it. The other part of it is that because of that, there are such few professionals and these professionals end up having very heavy caseloads and very little access to funding.

Education is a provincial jurisdiction, so the quality of services vary from province to province and even beyond that, vary from school to school.

One other thing that we also need to think about even more than that is the lack of support in territories and indigenous communities as well, which is an even greater problem.

More broadly, I think the issue of misconceptions around Braille, this idea that, well, now that we have technologies, maybe some technologies are "easier" to learn, more quick to learn, sometimes leads to a lack of understanding of why Braille is so vital. There are lots of teachers of students with visual impairments who understand that Braille is vital, but there are also lots of people around TVIs and sometimes even in our field who hold these misconceptions. I’m constantly addressing these misconceptions and really ensuring that there is legislation that relates to supporting students who need Braille.

In terms of your other question, I’ll just quickly answer. There’s certainly always lots of advocacy issues to be thinking about. One that BLC has been focusing on a lot more as of late is the issue of supporting people who experience a visual impairment later on in life, which right now are the majority of people that require services. Older adults, for example. And so we need to be confronting all of the misconceptions, not just around Braille, but also around the ability for older adults to learn, to ensure that they have those opportunities and that services are available to them.

Q: I love a lot of the work you guys are doing. How are you funded, and can you discuss the independence of Braille Literacy Canada?

A: Thank you, I really appreciate this question because I didn’t mention it in my presentation. We run entirely on donations. Definitely we very much appreciate any donations. BLC believes in partnerships so we collaborate with anyone who supports our mandate. We have corporate members. We also have organizations where individuals in organizations join as members. We work collaboratively with both CELA and NNELS who are working hard on maintaining funding for accessible libraries. Our corporate members include many different organizations, like T-Base Communications, the Alliance for the Equality of Blind Canadians, CNIB, and many others. First and foremost, we are happy to work with anyone who supports Braille literacy in any way and we believe that that kind of partnership is crucial for moving any kind of issue forward.

Q: Terrific presentation again, home run after home run. I’m just curious, as a constant Braille user myself. You mentioned in your presentation that people still question the relevance of Braille. I just want to get your take on it. Obviously ignorance is a huge part of that in terms of why there’s a need for physical transcription. You’ve got to wonder, with the evolution of Braille technology as a specific sort of niche area, with Braille displays seeming to keep up with other developments in telecommunications and digitized technology, why do some people actually doubt or question the relevance of Braille, with the development of all these gadgetries?

A: There’s many different things that play into that. Part of it is, sometimes those questions come from people who know very little about how blind people perform all kinds of different tasks and so have a very limited understanding of the assistive technologies that exist. But I think part of it also comes back to understanding that even though there are all of these audio accesses to information, there’s still tasks and times when Braille is really vital. I’m sure you can think from your own lives where Braille is really vital. I wouldn’t be able to give a presentation if I didn’t know Braille because I wouldn’t be able to access my notes. So, helping people understand that. Obviously the spelling, phonetics, all of that too, right? And that doesn’t go away when you are no longer able to see.

The other aspect that connects with this is also the cost of refreshable Braille technology and highlighting to people that we need to continue to advocate for lower cost devices because what those tools do is provide greater access to Braille. First of all, there aren’t funding programs everywhere to purchase these devices. But even when they exist, they often exclude adults, for example, who might not be working or studying and that’s a real problem because that’s the majority of people who are just diagnosed with a visual impairment and they need access to those tools to find motivating materials to learn Braille in adulthood.

Thank you.

For more information, see brailleliteracycanada.ca

Victoria’s Bike Lanes Found Discriminatory Against Blind Transit Users by BC Human Rights Tribunal

– Case Update, May 2021 –

Speech by Oriano Belusic, CFB First Vice President
presented at the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB)
‘Choices and Goals’ 2021 Virtual Convention, April 30 – May 2, 2021

Thank you. Sounds like a fantastic convention. Nice to hear so many new people, new voices.

I am Oriano Belusic and live in Victoria, BC. Some of you have probably heard over the last couple years that the City of Victoria has constructed some new bike lanes infrastructure in Victoria and the bike lanes that they’ve constructed are in between the pedestrian sidewalks and bus islands where you wait to get on the bus and where you disembark from the bus.

So, it poses a problem for blind people because there's no audio cues that a blind person can pick up on to safely cross the bike lanes, which are increasingly being used for e-scooters and other silent mobility devices, you name it, I've seen all kinds of stuff on them. And some of these e-scooters are not small. Some weigh upwards of 200-250 pounds and you put a 250-pound human being on it and you're dealing with something that's 500 pounds and if you get hit by something like that, it is a potential injury, or even worse.

We've written extensively to the City and to the provincial government trying to get them to reverse the design flaws, implement some changes that will make it safer for blind people to navigate this hazard. They're not interested in the slightest. There's a City agenda that basically says: We're all for cycling.

It's not that blind folks are against cycling, we're not. We understand the importance of cycling for health and as a more affordable way of getting around, plus other benefits in the community, but it shouldn't be at the expense of blind people's safety, who wish to be independent in their community.

So having no other option, we ended up engaging a lawyer, a law firm here in Victoria, and took the case forward to the BC Human Rights Tribunal. That process started about 1 3/4 years ago, almost two years ago, and last November or early December we received a decision that bike lanes do pose a discriminatory construct. In other words, there is discrimination involved.

But unfortunately the tribunal doesn't have an answer and they didn't see fit to order these things to be removed. Maybe in the back of their minds that would have caused significant undue hardship. I, of course, and many others in the blindness community don't believe that there is such a thing as undue hardship for a city that has a budget of several hundred million dollars. It cost them a few million to put these things in and might cost them half a million to take them out and require the buses to come back in to the safety of the pedestrian sidewalk in order to pick up and drop off people. So it's certainly not something that would push the City out of business and that is usually the definition of undue hardship. I don't believe we are dealing with that.

But the way some of us take it is that blind people are just not important enough. There's not enough of us voting out there for such an order to be put in place.

There were recently some additional bus stops put in on the way to Sooke, which is a neighbouring community about 20-30 km outside of Victoria. These bus stops, the slope for wheelchairs was improper, and they quietly tore all of those out at the cost of who knows how many millions of dollars and rebuilt them so that people with wheelchairs could get on and off the buses that go out to Sooke. So it is possible to fix these problems, but again, we haven’t got that far.

So, we do have this situation at the moment where discrimination was found in our case. We’re going to the remedy section later on in the year. There’s some mediation efforts on the way at the moment which are unlikely to yield anything, because the City, to date, has been very, very rigid to basically do something that would put in place a safe way of us crossing these bike lanes.

That’s all we’re after. We’re after a solution that enables blind people, whether they are travelling with a white cane or a guide dog, to cross these safely, and use public transit, which is what passive transit is all about. At the moment, the blind are most impacted. Other groups are impacted, you know, the elderly, people with mobility challenges. There’s been all kinds of close calls. We have had blind people with their canes wrecked by bikes at these bike lanes.

It’s a very nontraditional design of a streetscape. A lot of people assume that when you get off a bus you can start walking forwards or backwards on the sidewalk because you could assume you are on a sidewalk. But in Victoria, you soon find out that you end up out in the middle of the road, or hitting some metal bike parking stalls. Until you realize that you are actually not on the sidewalk, that you still have to cross a 9-foot wide bike lane and then you are on the safety of the sidewalk, it is disorienting unless you’re aware of the way it’s been designed and implemented.

We’ve been contacted by other communities around the world – folks in Scotland, England, Ireland, even the Netherlands – who are having similar problems. When you hear that things are going well in Europe where these cycling infrastructure have been implemented, don’t believe it, it’s not true. Blind people are having troubles there as well.

And I’m sure these are coming in other parts of Canada and the US. We recently learned that the City of Nanaimo was implementing the same design as we have here in Victoria. We wrote to the mayor of Nanaimo and to the City there expressing our concerns about it and saying that this case is pending and it hasn’t been resolved yet. So, hopefully, by having this BC Human Rights decision, we’re at least not completely silent on the issue. People do know about it. Unfortunately not much is being done about it yet but we have raised the voice level of the blind and the concerns of the blind so that they do know about it.

The best solution that they’ve put forward to date is an audible beeper that goes off when a yellow light flashes when people want to cross this bike lane. But, of course, that doesn’t do anything to communicate information to the blind person that it is indeed safe to cross, because we still cannot hear the approaching silent bike, and we have shown through video and other ways that the cyclists do not stop for these flashing warning lights. Cyclists are basically looking for eye contact to decide whether or not it's safe to cross and it's unfortunately not something blind people can do. Making eye contact with a cyclist is not possible.

So, it's a serious problem because it's just a matter of time before there's a miscalculation and one steps out in front of a bike. Like I've said, we've had many close calls and wrecked canes and that's unfortunate. It's one of these modern things where some cities like to be seen as forward thinking and forward planning, but at the cost of the blind and the safety of the blind.

We're working on it. We haven't given up. We're going to keep at it because we know we have a good case and I'm sure that a solution will be found. It's still a work in progress.

Q from the audience: Great presentation as always, great slate of presenters. I'm just curious. If government refuses this advocacy for the safety of people who are blind or visually impaired, would it be possible to institute any sort of legal precedent where if someone who is not paying attention on a bike and hits someone who is blind or visually impaired, could they face a similar penalty as someone who was driving a car negligently?

A: That's a big topic. Cyclists are not licensed. If you're hit by a licensed vehicle, there's provincial insurance in every province. But because cyclists are not licensed, it's a problematic issue, and it's very difficult to identify the cyclist that hit you. Quite often they will clear the scene before anyone gets evidence. It's hard to identify a cyclist from pictures because they quite often wear attire that covers up their features. One of the solutions we would definitely put forward is to have cameras at these crossings so that there is some recording capability. Maybe there could be some accountability because you never know if there's a chance that someone's bike or features could be identified. Right now there's nothing. It would be very difficult to seek justice if there was an incident, if the cyclist took off.

Q: You said at the end you were hoping that a solution would be found soon. I just wanted to clarify. So, there isn't a specific solution that you're pushing for at this time? Like 'this would solve the problem if we did x' other than ripping them out entirely?

A: Good point. As you know, we've been asked for solutions. Believe it or not, I have received many emails proposing all kinds of solutions. I don't doubt there are solutions that would likely work, but we did not create the problem and many of us are not engineers that would have the responsibility of proposing a solution. The traffic and urban infrastructure design, what one thinks would be a solution impacts a whole bunch of other variables that need to be considered. So, to a layperson, what sounds like an easy solution quite often is not as easy as it sounds. I have no doubt there is a solution. As a matter of fact, there's likely more than one. It's just that, to date, the City has not been interested in pursuing anything that would basically say that the safety of blind people crossing is paramount. And it should be, right? The word "safety" triggers a lot of things and usually it is paramount to things like enjoyment and pleasure and other things. In this case, the safety of blind people was not taken into high consideration and other important factors were given precedence.

Q: That makes a lot of sense and these are absolutely spreading throughout the country. I live in Edmonton and we're seeing them pop up here and you're going to see them elsewhere for sure. It's sort of surprising that a solution hasn't been come up with somewhere in the world, because there's a lot of places where bike infrastructure has a much longer history than it does in Canada, especially given the climate that we live in. It's interesting, but I agree with you, there is a solution out there and it's probably going to take some technical expertise to come up with something.

A: We have to remember that blind people are a very passive community. I've heard noise and of concerns in the Netherlands, in the UK and other places, but not sufficient to be heard that loud and clear to the politicians who make decisions.

I think it's up to us as blind folks to make more noise about the safety of these things. And you know, we in the Federation, whether it's the Canadian Federation of the Blind or the National Federation of the Blind (in the US), we're the last people to unnecessarily raise this kind of a safety concern.

The problem is when it becomes completely dangerous to navigate your own community no matter how good you are with your white cane skills or with your listening skills or with your guide dog travel skills. You know, you're being asked to accept risk beyond what you should be required to accept for independent living.

That's when something has to be said, even though there is a chance that some will perceive it as though we're not capable of managing in our own community. It's pushing things too far. So, it's paramount that people do speak out about this sort of thing. You know, we can deal with an awful lot of obstacles and get around them and work around them, and use blindness skills, you name it, but there comes a point when sometimes you do have to speak out when something is inaccessible and even worse, when it's not safe. Thank you.

Kernels: A Year Unlocked

Speech by Maggie Bray
at the Canadian Federation of the Blind
'Choices and Goals' Virtual Convention, April 30 – May 2, 2021

Editor's note: The Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group uses articles from the Kernel Book series which are published by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the US. The NFB is a sister organization to the CFB in Canada.

There are currently 27 Kernel Books which tell the stories of blind men and women. When the first editor, Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, was asked why he chose the name Kernel Book, he said: "We wanted to go to the very heart of blindness, trying to show our readers what it's really like—and, for that matter, what it isn't like."

If you are blind, what do you think and how do you look at things – not how do you look at them physically – but what is your point of view and perspective? How about dating and marriage? What about children, recreation, work, and relations with others? In short, how do blind people live and feel on a daily basis? What we are trying to do is to cut through the sentimentality and misconceptions to the very 'kernel' of the subject of blindness.

Kernel Books can be read online at https://www.nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/books/kernel1/kernels.htm

Despite the setbacks that the world has endured, it has been an incredible year for the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group, run by the Canadian Federation of the Blind. So far, I believe that the blind community has had a distinct advantage during the Covid crisis. We have this advantage because we already know what it feels like to be isolated from others. We often have been compelled to use technology, such as chat rooms and telephone conference lines, to communicate with each other for the past twenty years. Even so, the Kernels of Hope group, like many other virtually-based social organizations, has had to step up its game, especially during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020. We are honoured to have been able to provide needed aid in the following eight ways:

First, we encouraged unity within the blind community.

Second, we attempted to provide our members with a sense of normality.

Third, we, as a support group, were able to reach out with love to other blind people.

The fourth way in which we provided aid was to give people opportunities, both to socialize, and to learn about Federation philosophy.

Fifth, being in the group helped us to take control of our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions.

In the sixth place, we gained knowledge, not just about Federation philosophy, but of other ways to cope with the pandemic as well.

Edification deserves the seventh place.

Then lastly, we really enjoyed providing those who participated with a diversion.

In many ways, the blind community is more unified than many other communities of sighted people. However, the pandemic has put pressure on the most close knit of strongholds. By increasing the frequency of our meetings from once a month to once a week, we were able to give people more of a chance to get together and receive support from each other. More meetings kept us focused on meeting each other's needs as well as our own. Personally, I really enjoyed doing the meetings more frequently because, not only did I meet more people, and get to know others better, I was able to realize that some blind people in other parts of the country, and even the world, had it worse than I did.

Normal life is something that all blind people strive to achieve in one way or another. In its way, the pandemic leveled the playing field. Despite this new equality among blind and sighted people, it would have been hard to focus on the positives without the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group to provide a sense of normality for us. Without Kernels, I, personally, would have been at a loose end. I am not a person who deals with change very well. I like to figure out what works and stick with it. Then, when I am unable to stick with the routine I have established, I feel angry and anxious. Doing the Kernels meetings once a week provided me with something new to focus on and helped me to maintain a sense of normality.

One thing about being in the Federation that I have always treasured is the sense of support, and yes, even love, that I felt from the other members even before the pandemic. The leadership has always been encouraging when I have an idea, and have treated my mistakes with compassion and grace. Because we received so much love from the Federation at large, we were able to show that same love to the members of our group. Because of this, we were able to handle sensitive topics, such as our struggles for independence, even within our own families.

I believe that the most extreme example of love shown by the members of the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group this year, occurred when my grandmother fell and broke her hip. She required two surgeries and eight weeks in the hospital in order to put things right. Even though she has been home for nearly one and a half years now, she still requires 24/7 care. The members of Kernels embraced me during the transition and I couldn't have made it through without them.

Opportunities are usually pretty hard to come by if you are a member of the blind community. However, the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group provided many opportunities for those who participated in it.

One member told me: "A couple of years ago, I couldn't see myself being able to talk to people. Now, this year, I have given two interviews, one on a radio show and one on a Tube cast.”

What an accomplishment that is! I am so glad that the Kernels group was able to encourage people to take the opportunities that were given to them.

Control is another thing that not many blind people feel that they have. When the pandemic hit, we lost even more control. The Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group attempted to give that back as much as possible.

Last spring, we had Joanne Gabias, certified orientation and mobility instructor and daughter of Mary Ellen, join us to talk about how cane training can be conducted virtually.

Then earlier in 2021, we had two weeks where we talked about blind people who went into business for themselves. It is my hope that members were inspired by hearing about how other blind people took control of their lives.

This group has helped me take control of my life in the following ways:

First, I was determined to create a YouTube channel so that I could better serve the group.

Second, I was inspired to begin an online feline therapy centre.

And third, I joined an open mike music group and am doing an album with another member.

These things would never have happened in my life if the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group hadn't helped me to take control.

They say that knowledge is power. That means that we have some pretty powerful people in the Canadian Federation of the Blind. We are so blessed that these knowledgeable folks choose to come out to Kernels and share what they know.

I remember one time after a meeting when a bunch of us stayed on the line for an extra three hours discussing Federation philosophy. The Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group is a comfortable place to give and receive knowledge. This knowledge ranges from something simple, like helping people join the CFB mailing list, to something intense, like helping people change what they believe about themselves. This is where edification comes into the picture.

Edify is a more old-fashioned word. Basically, it means to encourage someone, even if they're not there to hear it. Other people would use the word edify to mean seeing someone in the most positive way possible, even when their actions may have been negative. I must confess that, over this past year, not all of my actions have been positive. But, even when I mess things up, the leadership and the members of the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group have had nothing but positive things to say about me. I cannot put into words how important that is to me.

Last, but not by any means least, the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group has been able to provide its members with a diversion.

Last spring, when things were seriously stringent, I decided that I did not want to spend Easter weekend feeling sorry for myself. It is for this reason that I proposed that we start doing fun night every Saturday evening.

The first fun night we ever had was on the Saturday evening between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. I don't know about anyone else, but it certainly made my Easter weekend better. I really appreciate everyone who came out and helped me fight the blues that day. For our fun nights, we played games, like Song Burst and Blackjack. We also did other fun things, like an extreme humour night and a recipe exchange night, for which I would like to extend special thanks to Erik Burggraaf for giving us a talk on home brewing.

Finally, we were able to use the conference line to do a special fun fireworks night for Victoria Day and Canada Day. I am so grateful to the Canadian Federation of the

Blind for making all of this possible. Our year wouldn't have been as much fun without your cooperation.

I hope that as we examine how Kernels of Hope provided unity, normality, love, opportunities, control, knowledge, edification and diversion, that you will see how we tried to help this past year become unlocked for our participants.

We have no way of knowing what this next year will bring. Will the lockdowns continue? Will we be able to vaccinate enough people that Covid will be destroyed so we can get back to our normal lives?

Well, whether we do or not, the Kernels of Hope Peer Support Group will be here to unlock another year for you if you will only turn the key.

Convention Hello from Marci Carpenter President, NFB of Washington

at the Canadian Federation of the Blind
‘Choices and Goals’ 2021 Virtual Convention Banquet, May 1, 2021

Introduction by Mary Ellen Gabias: I am very excited to introduce someone who has been a personal friend and a sister in the movement for at least 40 years. Marci Carpenter is a solid, strong Federation leader and currently serves as the President of my nearest state affiliate, the National Federation of the Blind of Washington. Marci has been with us all weekend. The NFB of Washington has been gracious in hosting and encouraging the Canadian Federation of the Blind members from British Columbia, who have visited the Washington conventions. She has helped us at national conventions as well. So, for a few words, I’d like to introduce Marci Carpenter, President of the NFB of Washington.

Marci Carpenter: Thank you so much Mary Ellen, and I think it has been about 40 years.

Good evening everyone. It’s so great to be here. The spirit, the love, the commitment are so evident and it’s really great.

As Mary Ellen said, I am the President of the NFB of Washington. Just a little information about me: My pronoun is she/her/hers. My Zoom photo is a photo of me taken just prior to an NFB national convention banquet a couple years ago. I’m a cis gender, Caucasian woman with blonde and some white hair. My photo has me standing against a light blue background holding my cane and wearing a bright blue banquet dress with sparkles and a little vest.

I just wanted to say a little about my journey in the Federation. I was born blind, but I never thought of myself as blind. I was caught in this weird in-between world. Although I wouldn't have articulated it this way as a child, I now understand that what I found myself as was a defective sighted person.

After I left high school, I went through a residential blindness training centre and there I listened to some speeches by Jacobus tenBroek and Kenneth Jernigan. I began to think, alright, well maybe this has something to offer me and I'd check it out.

That same year I saw a CBS evening news broadcast of some information about the Federation's national convention that was happening that year – a protest that was happening regarding blind people being denied our canes on airplanes. I'll never forget, Walter Cronkite said: "One thousand blind people, canes tapping in unison." That was such a great image to me, so much power there.

So a couple years later in April 1981 when the state affiliate here was being revitalized, I attended my first NFB convention – the same year as my first NFB national convention.

I've met so many wonderful people over the years, whether it's people that are in my state like Bennett Prows, Maria Bradford, here with us this weekend, Scott LaBarre, Mary Ellen Gabias – all the leaders in the Federation, and just all the people in the Federation. I so enjoy just sitting and talking with members. We're always very excited to welcome our Canadian Federation family here in Washington state or to be together at national conventions.

So glad to be here and to have you as my friend, Mary Ellen. Thank you.

"He taught us it is respectable to be blind!"
~ Words from the blind community on the tombstone in Baltimore of longtime NFB leader, Kenneth Jernigan.

Convention Message From Scott LaBarre, This Year's NFB Representative

at the Canadian Federation of the Blind
'Choices and Goals' 2021 Virtual Convention Banquet, May 1, 2021

(excerpted for brevity)

Introduction by Mary Ellen Gabias: I always find it exciting to introduce the person chosen by the national President of the National Federation of the Blind to represent him. It is impossible for the NFB President to be everywhere as much as he'd like to be, but he's sent us this year a very fine advocate and representative.

Scott LaBarre is a native of Minnesota, and a former winner of an NFB scholarship. He is currently the National Counsel for the NFB. He is the President of the National Association of Blind Lawyers and has served for many years and is finishing up his final term as the President of the NFB of Colorado.

Beyond all of that, Scott LaBarre is a man who has thought deeply about blindness and what it means, and who has a long history of being of service to other blind people and giving and receiving the kind of encouragement and support that we've come to know and expect from the NFB.

I know that what he will have to say tonight will make me think because what he says always does. It is with great joy and pleasure that I introduce Scott LaBarre.

Scott LaBarre: It is a great day being with all of you. I have been coming in and out as I can throughout the day and I've really enjoyed the convention.

I'm down here at the 39th parallel, which runs through Denver, Colorado. I do not exactly live in Denver; I live in a suburb called Centennial, Colorado, about 12 miles southeast of downtown Denver.

I am sitting here on my patio in our backyard. I am wearing a purple NFB collared golf shirt that has my name on it, the NFB logo and all that good stuff. I am a white, cis gender male, almost 53 years old. My pronouns are he/him/his.

I have literally been involved in the National Federation of the Blind all of my adult life. I met the NFB because of a scholarship. I was graduating from high school in Woodbury, Minnesota, which is just outside of St. Paul, Minnesota, and I was applying for a bunch of scholarships.

Here's the thing. Everybody at that time told me that I should really stay away from the NFB – they're a bunch of crazy, radical, militant people that used seven-foot long canes and they were really scary!

But, when I got informed that I'd been selected as a scholarship finalist, I was also informed that if I wanted to complete the process and get the money, I would indeed have to attend the convention.

Honestly, I didn't want to be involved with any blind organization. I thought blind people were weird. I know I was blind, but I was in an integrated school, mainstreamed as we said here in the US.

I went blind in 1978. The law that's now called the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act was first passed in 1975, and so for me in 1978 this whole idea of the integrated classroom was still a pretty new idea in the US.

That's what I had experienced because a few weeks after I went blind, I went back to my local Royal Oaks Elementary School and I learned Braille and cane travel and how to type, starting the very first day that I was back at school. I never realized until much later how lucky I was, because I got those skills.

Now, why? The reason is because when I went blind, I went essentially totally blind (I had light perception for a couple years), so they had, in effect, no choice but to teach me these skills.

So I honestly am very thankful that I did not have to struggle like so many of my colleagues have had to struggle with not knowing – Marci talked about this a little earlier – not knowing which world to live in – am I sighted, am I a defective sighted person, am I a broken sighted person, what am I? Or am I blind? And, trying to figure out, you know, what skills you should use, when and how and what's efficient and what's effective, I don't envy anybody who's had to go through that struggle. For me, it was obvious (being totally blind), so I was lucky in that sense and as a result I got a good education.

I got Braille, as I've said. I learned how to type on an IBM Selectric typewriter. That was fancy technology back in the day. Basically it was an electric typewriter that had a little ball that would spin around and strike the paper with the ink on the page. Of course, there wasn’t any feedback from the typewriter, you just had to hope you typed well. The only feedback was when you could get somebody to read it to you.

So I learned all these things and I did well in school. That’s why I was applying for all these scholarships. But every blind person I knew was somebody who was on social security here in the US, somebody who was on some kind of assistance. I only knew a couple of people who had jobs.

One was a guy who, as I would later learn a great deal about, was working in the Randolph-Sheppard Vending Program. He had a nice route of vending machines, lots of machines, and he seemed like he did pretty well.

The other guy I knew was a radio announcer. He was on WCCO 830, which was the big AM station in Minneapolis-Saint Paul. It’s still there. It was really interesting to me because he was a traffic reporter. You’d think, a traffic reporter? That’s sort of an unusual job for a blind person.

But what he did was sit in his home and they installed a special high quality audio installation in his home and he would sit in the morning and the afternoon and listen to all the police scanners and all the reports from the highway department and then he would get on WCCO and tell us all about where the traffic jams were. Later on as things evolved, WCCO got a helicopter, so Dean and whoever was the helicopter pilot would talk back and forth about, “Well, you know, on the scanner they said there’s a jam at I-94 and (street crossing)” and the copter guy would come on and tell us all about how bad it was.

He was held up as the absolute crowning achievement of what you could do and the success you could have as a blind person. There wasn’t anything better than that. And I was thinking to myself, “But that was a very special job created for one person and he was lucky enough and talented enough to do it and had a nice on-air personality. What else can I do? Every other blind person I know is poor, dirt poor.”

I saw these dirt poor blind people that I knew, had Master’s degrees. So I thought, “Alright, I’m going off to college, I’m a good student, I’ve worked my rear end off, but what is really out there for me? What will really be my life? Am I destined to be one of these educated blind people trapped in their apartments, living on government benefits, without hope?” So I didn’t really want to be with blind people.

But that all changed in late June, early July 1986. It was the first time, as a blind person, I travelled anywhere on an airplane by myself. I was scared to death, not only scared about the travelling, because I might get lost, but I was also scared because of what I’d been told about the National Federation of the Blind. It was not good, it was scary, these people were scary!

I was so wrong. I was 100 percent wrong. What happened when I got to Kansas City is I met hundreds of warm, inviting, inspirational people who taught me that it was okay to be blind, and that your blindness didn't have to hold you back from pursuing your dreams, whatever those dreams were. That convention was the first time I'd met blind lawyers, first time I'd met blind academics, first time I'd met blind fill-in-the-blanks. And that was so incredibly inspirational to me.

I met a young man, who later I came to know incredibly well, Marc Maurer. He met me in the hallway and just welcomed me in and he was a lawyer at that time. That was in fact the convention where he would become President of the NFB, a post that he held until 2014. He was one of the people who inspired me. There were so many others. And that's how I met the Federation in 1986.

Even though things have changed a lot in our world, that's still the core function of the Federation, right? That's how we build the National Federation of the Blind, or in your case, the Canadian Federation of the Blind. It's person by person, communicating the message of hope and of love, that your blindness does not have to hold you back. Your blindness, your visual impairment, your low vision, your optical preclusion, your hard sightedness, whatever you call it – our disability that we share is not the thing that defines our future.

Now, it does play a role in our lives, there's no doubt. It has real impacts and sometimes those impacts suck. But it doesn't have to hold us back. Once we have the philosophy and then we gain access to good training, like what it sounds like you're doing in the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind, once we have those skills and the confidence and maybe most importantly, the support of one another, this family that we have, there's no reason to allow your blindness to hold you back from whatever your dreams are as a person.

…Hats off on a great convention!…

> "A light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself."
> ~ *Plato*

Finding a Place to Live: Challenges in Housing; Plus, the CFB 2021 Convention

by Ben Fulton

Editor's note: Ben is a CFB member and a blind lawyer from Mississauga, Ontario.

This year the CFB, like everyone else, had to host their annual convention online. I was impressed by how well it all came together. I attended the event as an attendee and as a speaker for a section on Saturday where I discussed the challenges in housing faced by many blind Canadians. This presentation went beyond merely providing information. It was a call to action.

I am working with a colleague to bring a challenge to a part of the Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC) that allows landlords to discriminate.

To clarify, this is s.21(1) which states:
21 (1) The right under section 2 to equal treatment with respect to the occupancy of residential accommodation without discrimination is not infringed by discrimination where the residential accommodation is in a dwelling in which the owner or his or her family reside if the occupant or occupants of the residential accommodation are required to share a bathroom or kitchen facility with the owner or family of the owner. R.S.O. 1990, c. H.19, s. 21 (1).

This section removes the protection otherwise provided by the OHRC if the landlord is renting out a room in their place. This effectively prevents many people from accessing the shared housing market. For many Canadians, shared accommodations is the only affordable option, especially in Toronto where the average costs for a bachelor apartment is over $1,000.

This section of the OHRC allows landlords to discriminate on any of the otherwise prohibited grounds. According to this legislation any racist, bigoted, or intolerant behavior would be tolerated and landlords could continue to rent our rooms without any notion of equality.

The call to action I brought to this year's convention is for others who have experienced discrimination in housing, or anyone who knows anyone who has to come forward and help build a case to bring before the Superior Court to challenge the legislation. The more support we can get for this, the better. I have been working with Erik Burggraaf to create a letter that is now on CFB’s website. We encourage people to read it and share with anyone who may have experienced discrimination in shared housing. We are asking people to go to the website and share their experiences with us to strengthen our case. Please go to: https://www.cfb.ca/discrimination-in-shared-housing.

The convention was a spectacular event. The CFB was able to host Scott LaBarre from the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) for the evening gala event. He joined us from the comfort of his outdoor patio in Colorado. The necessity to host everything online this year did allow more people to attend from far and wide, with much reduced travel costs.

We heard wonderful news about everything the CFB is doing. I especially enjoyed the presentation about the 100-year monopoly of the CNIB and I will be working to spread the word about NNELS and CELA going forward. The work being done in Victoria around the bike lanes and the takeover of Camp Bowen are inspirations from the west coast. In Ontario, our very own Brian and Kerry Kijewski continue to host their radio show, Outlook On Radio Western, now surpassing 100 episodes. No one was more surprised than Brian himself when he won a door prize, and I hope it helps him with their podcast.

It was an excellent event that really came together. It was good to see the CFB annual convention find a home online this year, although I am sure everyone here is looking forward to the time when we can again come together in person. May we all be together next year.

Nancy’s Travelling Voice: In her own words

By Kerry Kijewski, in conversation with Nancy Gill

“Why am I here? I don’t know why I’m here.”

Nancy Gill is a regular participant of CFB-related events and the annual national convention is no exception. Here, she is given the chance to discover what her talents are, something many of us, including Nancy, didn’t learn earlier in our lives. Her position every year as the door prize announcer, sometimes referred to as “Door Prize Lady,” is where she can shine and use her voice to bring happiness in the form of giveaways, which most people love.

It began years ago, on Nancy's day off work, when she happened to come across a television interview with Elizabeth Lalonde (then President of the Canadian Federation of the Blind), speaking about the things that blind people in Canada need so they can be more successful and be on an equal playing field as citizens.

Nancy has worked as a hairdresser, cashier, and house cleaner, not to mention that she's also the mother of two grown children, and she'd already had an impressive background in fundraising for organizations, like the CNIB. But when her own vision began to diminish, she wasn't receiving enough support from them or anyone.

"I try to help other people, but when it comes to myself – I help everyone else and when it comes to me, I didn't want anyone to know my personal problems because I was scared that they were laughing at me."

During childhood, Nancy struggled with communicating and learning in a family where Usher Syndrome had left its mark. A genetic condition on her father's side of the family, Usher's causes progressive deafness and blindness.

Growing up in her home, she heard from her mother that she, Nancy, was talking fast and not making sense, "because my mom would always say, 'Nancy, I don't understand you.'"

Her father was a millwright and was around loud machinery all day long. At home, the TV was always on a high volume.

In school, she wasn't understood and this made education difficult to obtain. At that time, conditions like Usher's weren't known or understood and children like Nancy couldn't possibly receive the supports they required to learn all the building blocks of language. She was often passed in grades because it was just easier, but years later she feels she missed out on a lot and is trying her best to learn some of what she missed back then, including things like braille.

Finding confidence and one's voice, if you aren't hearing yours or anyone else's all your life, makes catching up when older a challenge. But Nancy is discovering her voice, which is already always thought to be too loud because she had trouble hearing herself in her own ears and head. But, announcing door prizes, a voice that carried would be essential.

She's heard it from multiple people: "A lot of people were saying that 'you're talking too fast, but you do have a voice.' So now, I feel like I'm a travelling voice, because my voice will speak louder."

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is and should be all about helping Canadians who are blind find their voices and how to use them. Nancy was a good fit to be the announcer of door prizes, but once you get to know her a little, it's easily spotted how she genuinely finds joy and purpose when she can be the one to call out a lucky prize winner's name and award someone something that can make life more fun for the winner.

"And doing the door prizes, I feel good about it, because I can say that I've done something to help other people."

At the 2021 'Choices and Goals' Virtual Convention (Nancy's idea for a title and theme), she came prepared. Her signature contribution to our convention came in the form of the thought she put behind her outfit changes, happily reporting them to all of us listening virtually, who couldn't see them, but might still wish to know.

These outfit changes ranged from a blue dress and blue prize name bucket. To a black-and-white dotted dress that made her think of popcorn and the companion bucket, one of those plastic popcorn tubs. Or the animal paw print dress and the names sitting together in a cat transport container, things she had around the house, where she joined in virtually for convention, like the rest of us.

Not to mention the use of technology she brought to her role this year, after her father gifted Nancy and other blind relatives last Christmas.

The OrCam is a small camera and reading device about the size of a tube of lipstick, which can be worn around the neck or attached magnetically to a pair of glasses for easy scanning and reading of things, like books and signs and posters.

Since receiving this device, Nancy has been attending lessons on uses for OrCam and instruction on practical applications. Waking up at seven in the morning, as the classes were put on by a woman in Israel, Nancy immersed herself in OrCam talk to best know how she could find use in the product.

Needing to read names from a draw without knowing braille, she found independence with the use of the OrCam, when in the past she'd require the partnership of a sighted neighbour or friend to help read names. Even now, when there's talk of using technology and random prize-drawing software that would eliminate the need for someone to do the door prizes, this would upset Nancy to lose her long-held position. Technology has its place, but no software can replace Nancy's energy and kindness.

So after receiving a printout of all the names of those attending the convention, she was able to get them cut up so they could all go in her buckets for drawing.

In past years, she had enough vision to write out names with a dark felt pen on flashcards. This year, her blindness has made reading large print letters unrealistic. So, enter OrCam.

Her energy in this role is accompanied by the fact that her voice is now a prominent one. Her pure love of wanting to make others happy is clear once you see or hear her in action.

“When I wasn’t working, I’d be writing out Christmas cards for all my customers, even if I didn't know them, everyone got a Christmas card.”

From her history of fundraising, first for the CNIB and Easter Seals, soon she was doing it all on her own (with the backing of the Vancouver Foundation) bringing together a bunch of vendors for a day of talking about all things blindness. She approached businesses and politicians, such as BC NDP Peter Julian, getting them to pitch in something so she could help spread the word that blindness doesn’t have to be the end of anything of value in life, a common misconception of sighted people in a mostly sighted world.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind is lucky to have people like Nancy involved, giving back as much as (or more) than the help CFB has given her over the years. It’s the kind of give and take that is most beneficial to all involved.

“I have to have my voice – my voice, right?”

And hers rings clear with kindness for other people, while discovering her own voice and her continued ability to keep learning at any age. Her voice is a key part of what makes the CFB conventions so memorable every year, but this year she stepped up, like others have, during a pandemic where in-person conventions have become a thing of the past, at least for these last couple years.

Finding voice and purpose are important in anyone’s life, but Nancy is grateful for it, recently celebrating her 60th birthday by asking for donations in lieu of gifts, wishing to donate to help support the existence of better blindness skills training, in mobility and independent travel, in life skills, employment opportunities, and technology.

“I didn't want gifts. I’d rather get people to donate money for ‘my’ charity – for the Pacific Training Centre and Camp Bowen. So my 60th birthday was all about giving, in some way. So that's what I did for my birthday, for my 60th birthday.”

These days she’s been running a senior’s group which gives purpose, all the while continuing to support independence for Canadians who are blind. She believes we, in Canada, need to do more to support our blind citizens with blindness skills training within our own country, rather than going to the US for that. That’s part of what these conventions promote and Nancy is already benefiting from these things in her own life, by setting an example for others to take some action in their own lives, to find their own purpose and voice.

Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) Members Elect National Executive Board for 2021 - 2022

Editor’s note: Please note the Addendum at the bottom of this article, since in September 2021 there have been some board changes.

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) held elections for its National Executive Board at its Annual General Meeting on May 2, 2021. It was held via Zoom. All members of the Executive are blind and serve in their positions without compensation. This year, positions of First Vice President, Secretary and Member at Large were up for election.

Members re-elected Oriano Belusic, First Vice President.

Members elected Douglas Lawlor, Secretary.

Members elected Patrick Bouchard, Member at Large.

Members are grateful to Mary Ellen Gabias, President, Erik Burggraaf, Second Vice President, Brian Kijewski, Treasurer, and Elizabeth Lalonde, Immediate Past President for their continued hard work and service.

A huge thank you to retiring Secretary, Doris Belusic, for her many years of dedicated service to CFB.

Congratulations and thank you to the new Executive Board.

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

Addendum – September 2021 Board Changes

Our longtime President, Mary Ellen Gabias, retired from her position in September. A SUPER HUGE THANK YOU to Mary Ellen for all her years of dedicated service, mentorship, friendship and wisdom.

Due to this, interim positions have been filled until the 2022 AGM. They are:
Douglas Lawlor, transferred to the position of President.
Patrick Bouchard, transferred to the position of Secretary.
Mary Ellen Gabias is now Immediate Past President..
The position of Member at Large has been left vacant.

Thank you very much to Doug and Patrick for taking on these interim roles and doing a fantastic job.

Longtime CFB President, Mary Ellen Gabias, Retires

By Doris Belusic

It is with mixed emotions that we, in the Canadian Federation of the Blind, see the retirement of our longtime President, Mary Ellen Gabias. Of course, it is hard to let go of a President like her!

Mary Ellen Gabias
Photo Credit: Joanne Gabias

The position of President is demanding and Mary Ellen served in this capacity from May 2012 until this past September 2021. And before that, she served many years as our First Vice President. She fulfilled her roles with dedication, dignity, diplomacy, wisdom, spirit, and gave generously of her time, knowledge, experience, energy and friendship. Mary Ellen was mentor extraordinaire.

Mary Ellen, along with her husband, Dr. Paul Gabias, founded Federationism in Canada in 1992 and founded the CFB in 1999. Paul, a psychology professor at the University of BC Okanagan, received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Victoria in 2000 for his work in bringing Federationism to Canada.

Due to their vast early involvement in the National Federation of the Blind in the United States, Mary Ellen and Paul knew the importance and value of such an historic, grassroots, membership-driven, advocacy and mentoring organization – by the blind for the blind – and knew what such an organization can offer to the blind. They wanted to bring this successful blindness movement model to Canada.

Until then, Canada knew no such thing and for many blind Canadians, Federationism was something foreign and new, an eye-opener, no pun intended. It was what blind Canadians needed – this knowledge, that one can learn to be more independent, confident, successful and live the lives we want, if given appropriate blindness skills training, information and opportunities. We learned about not bending to societal low expectations or to the stigmas and stereotypings of blindness. We learned about being advocates for the greater good, and being advocates for ourselves in our own daily lives.

We learned about the importance of having a positive ‘can do’ attitude towards our blindness. We learned about the NFB-style long, white cane – better for mobility – and to view our canes with pride instead of shame, to see them as tools of ability, not inability, of independence, not dependence. And we learned about powerful Federation philosophy:

- We are an organization of blind people speaking for ourselves.
- We believe blindness is a characteristic and not a handicap; that blindness is not what defines us or holds us back.
- We believe with proper training and opportunity blind people can compete on terms of equality with sighted peers. Blind people can do almost anything sighted people do; sometimes we just use alternative techniques.
- We believe the real problem of blindness is not the lack of eyesight. It is inequality in society, low expectations, an old charity model, and the lack of positive information about blindness and the abilities and achievements of blind people.
- We believe it is respectable to be blind and that the white cane is an empowering tool for independence and a symbol of freedom and pride.

Through Paul and Mary Ellen, we gained knowledge about the three world-renowned U.S. NFB intensive blindness skills training centres and about NFB annual national conventions – the largest gatherings of blind people in the world, at about 3,000 attendees each year! We’ve met many U.S. Federation leaders and members, and listened to and talked with many successful role models, from blind lawyers, blind educators, blind business people, to blind writers and blind parents.

This takes me back to the early Federation days in Canada, when in 1997 Paul and Mary Ellen, at major expense, sponsored over 90 of us Canadian newbies to attend and experience our first-ever NFB convention, held that year in New Orleans. That was some week! Talk about educational, inspirational and life-changing for many of us who had never known that such events, that such learning grounds, existed. This was mentorship at its best!

Yes, it was Paul and Mary Ellen’s mission to expose blind Canadians to the benefits of Federation conventions, to bring together blind people, to learn from each other. They felt it was critically important that we, in Canada, know the value of attending these NFB conventions, but also to hold our own Canadian Federation gatherings – hence, our CFB conventions! The value of these conventions cannot be underestimated.

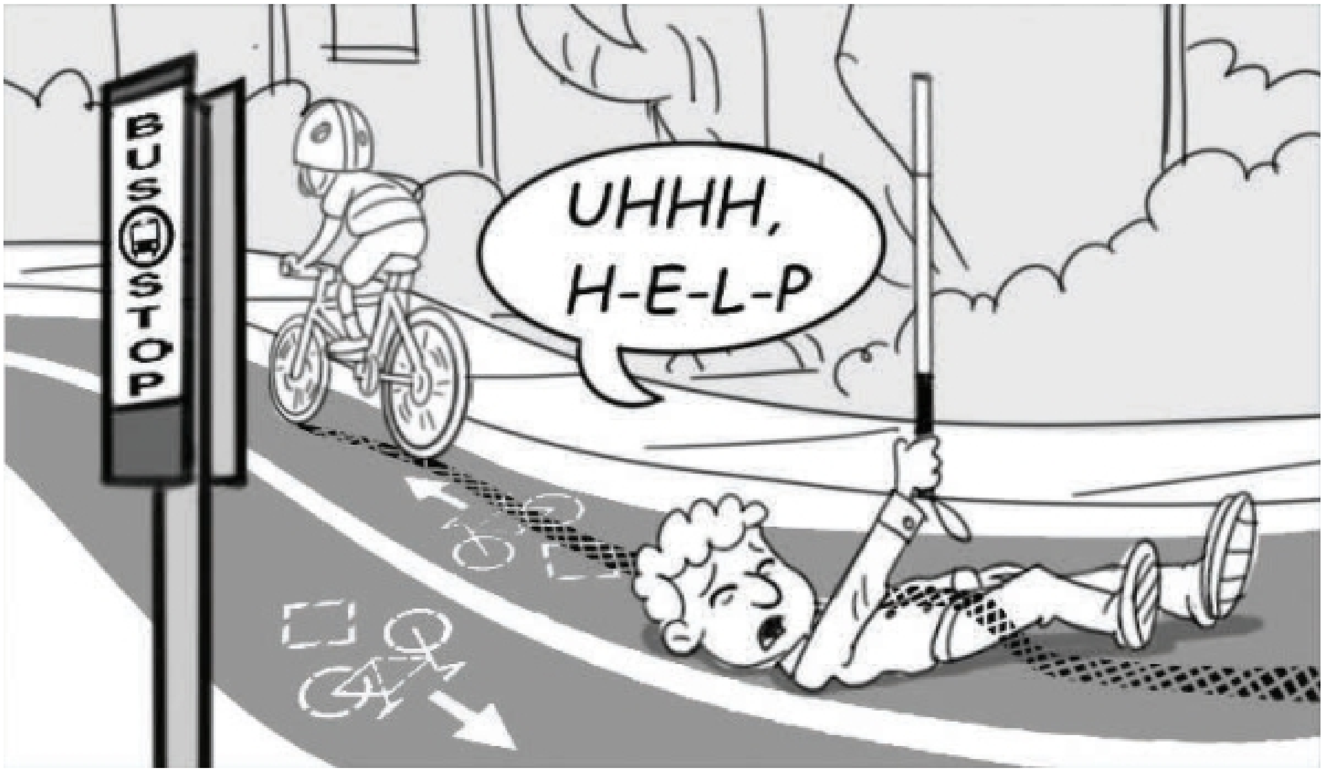
Mary Ellen was instrumental in our CFB conventions, including writing and presenting many informative and entertaining speeches and banquet addresses, which are preserved for all to read on CFB’s website, published within issues of our own CFB magazine, *The Blind Canadian*, which she also helped establish.

Mary Ellen was very instrumental in areas of blindness advocacy, including many government-related issues and issues on equitable library service. She must have written hundreds of letters over the years. She gave media interviews, attended important meetings, ran our monthly national CFB meetings, and helped plan and attended our rallies/ protests, as CFB advocated for positive change in several human rights cases and issues such as the need for better blindness rehabilitation services in Canada. Mary Ellen was also a strong advocate opposing Canada’s old, pervasive charity model, which in many ways has held the blind back, especially the working-age blind. The list of her advocacy work goes on and on.

When I mentioned that Mary Ellen was mentor extraordinaire, it wasn’t an exaggeration. She was knowledgeable on so many aspects concerning blindness and has helped many people on their own blindness journeys. And since she is the mother of four grown children, she has been able to offer a lot of experiential guidance to those who asked about blind parenting.

Because of the Gabiases, our thinking in Canada has shifted about blindness, about ourselves, and about possibilities.

All this and more is what Federationism is about. We, the blind in Canada, were given this gift of knowledge – an awakening. Today, Federationism is growing and expanding across this country. We owe a great deal of gratitude to Mary Ellen and Paul for all of their hard work. And a HUGE THANK YOU to Mary Ellen as she retires from the President's chair. May your retirement be joyful! But luckily for us, we still get to keep you, one chair over – as our Immediate Past President!



[Alt Text: Cartoon image – man lays in a bike lane near floating bus stop, holding white cane in the air, yelling "help!" The cyclist who hit him rides away.]

Cartoon by Kent Webb

Comment 1:

Flashing lights to cross bike lanes won't make it safer for blind pedestrians

by Graeme McCreath, *Times Colonist*, August 12, 2021

A commentary by a Victoria man who became blind from glaucoma and secondary ophthalmitis at age nine.

The City of Victoria has installed audible flashing lights to access the “floating” bus stops on Pandora Avenue and Wharf Street. Yet again blind pedestrians were never consulted.

Forcing blind Canadians to unnecessarily risk injury should never be justified. Deliberately moving normally safe bus stops from the curb to an island, making pedestrians cross a cyclists’ freeway, is absurd.

Members of the Canadian Federation of the Blind await their opportunity in the pending remedy section of the protracted B.C. Human Rights Tribunal case against the City that was originally filed in August 2018. Evidence presented at the first part of the public hearing indicated a lack of awareness of what constitutes a barrier to independent blind citizens.

The official decision of the tribunal was accompanied with an order to the City of Victoria to “cease and desist.”

This means that the City of Victoria must eliminate the discrimination of having blind pedestrians suffer unnecessary danger when using public transit.

Predictably, a blind transit user assumes that when exiting from a bus they are safely on the sidewalk. Similarly, a bus stop should be placed intuitively adjacent to a pedestrian’s line of travel. Deliberately altering this logical expectation is unreasonable.

Adoption of universal design principles would accomplish everyone’s needs.

The City councillors and planners have always been aware of disabled pedestrians, but have chosen to disregard blind Canadians and remain mean-spirited and unmoved.

Three years ago, two members of the Canadian Federation met with Coun. Jeremy Loveday. The meeting was to explain that they believed the “floating” stops were unsafe for blind individuals; the nonchalant response was “it’s a done deal.”

Correction involves meaningful engagement to eliminate the discrimination so as to address the fundamental design flaw in having the stops between the bike lanes and the road.

Commandeering much of a busy city road for privileged cyclists at the expense of the majority is inconsiderate in the extreme.

Having only buses entering and exiting the bike lanes to pick up passengers would only minimally affect cyclists, but significantly relieve traffic flow.

City streets, never designed for exclusive bike lanes, should incorporate compromise. Elected officials need to widen their perception and show support for everyone’s safety and dignity.

Comment 2:

Blind people's lives threatened by bike-lane design

by Graeme McCreath, *Times Colonist*, December 4, 2021

A commentary by the author of the award-winning book The Politics of Blindness.

Blind people such as myself often ponder, when opening the front door to venture out, who, where or when the next violation of our dignity and rights will occur.

What new barrier will be confronted, what new villainous treatment, trickery, unlawful act or unnecessary danger will present itself? All because restorative justice is just a pretext.

In the latest violation, the City of Victoria, despite advice from advisory groups, chose to ignore dependent blind transit users.

The construction of “floating bus stops,” away from the curb alongside bike lanes on Pandora Avenue and Wharf Street, were rushed into service.

Three years ago, the Canadian Federation of the Blind filed a case of discrimination, which the City tried to dismiss. After a protracted first portion of the case, the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal confirmed the city discriminated against blind people.

The sighted presiding judge, however, mistakenly accepted an audible flashing light as a “reasonable accommodation.”

The bike lane barrier is the discrimination that the tribunal described as “daunting” to step into and a simple flashing light fails to remove that danger.

For the City of Victoria to fundamentally choose to alter traditional curbside bus stop locations, despite opposing advice, is an intentional attack on the liberty and integrity of a vulnerable minority causing the destruction of their safety and independence.

A blind pedestrian can locate a bus stop in its normal place at the curbside.

Isolating a bus stop on an island away from the sidewalk, without their knowledge, amounts to a discriminatory act, never mind adding a bike lane barrier.

Would you hide a ramp or elevator from a wheelchair user?

Forcing transit-dependent blind pedestrians to try to figure out where to navigate across a double bike lane with speeding, silent cyclists presents an unnecessary and dangerous physical barrier.

Incredibly, while awaiting the court hearing, the City arbitrarily modified, but did not remove the barrier to access the stops.

The idea that the addition of an “audible” flashing light informs anyone of the location, speed or number of passing cyclists is preposterous.

This ineffective modification is analogous to adding a bannister or handrail to a flight of stairs to assist the wheelchair user.

It is not the blind citizen’s duty to constantly police every alteration that continues to add insult to injury. In fact, this irresponsible tactic belittles the blind complainants and jeopardizes the human rights process.

Expecting blind citizens to repeatedly chase the justice “can” when the City kicks it down the road makes a mockery of the legal process.

Now, it’s just astounding that the City is claiming blind people are attempting to re-argue the case when, in reality, the city surreptitiously carried out the ineffective modification without consultation with the very people involved.

Both sides should have a moral obligation to respect due process. Discrimination draws little condemnation from the judiciary and the Human Rights Tribunal as the last rung of the social ladder attracts little importance.

Powerful sighted officials presumptively believe they understand the concept of a barrier for a blind person. This arrogance is disingenuous — minimizing the act, excusing many discriminators, leaving the victim subjected to repeated persecution.

Such prejudice is either an inability to comprehend or, more likely, an innate preference to normalize discrimination.

The tribunal’s undisclosed settlements and published decisions to produce case law, including this latest disaster, are a recorded testament to the tribunal’s failure to stop increasing acts of hatred.

Emancipation of blind Canadians continues to be opposed by powerful civil servants.

Normalizing discrimination breeds anapirophobic or ableistic behaviour and is reminiscent of past abuse of blind people. Now, violations are subtle, deeply engrained and reflect an underlying culture of malice undeserving of a modern democratic society.

Blind people across this country, in the U.S. and overseas are watching this fiasco unfold before their very eyes.

> “Equality is the public recognition, effectively expressed in institutions and manners, of the principle that an equal degree of attention is due to the needs of all human beings.”
>
> ~ *Simone Weil*

[Alt Text: 3-frame cartoon image: 1. Blind man with guide dog waits first in line at taxi stand holding a sign saying 'taxi'. 2. Taxi arrives and drives away with customers who were not first in line. 3. Blind man remains alone at taxi stand, still holding his sign. The guide dog is thinking, 'Wow! We must be invisible.']

Cartoon by Kent Webb.

Letter to BC Premier John Horgan Regarding Taxi / Guide Dog Discrimination

Editor's note: Several months after this letter was sent to BC Premier John Horgan, CFB paid to publish it in the Times Colonist. It was published June 16, 2021, so the public could read about the ongoing taxi / guide dog discrimination issue.

Premier John Horgan
premier@gov.bc.ca

May 14, 2021

Dear Premier Horgan,

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) is a grassroots, volunteer organization of blind Canadians.

Superficially, blindness is unattractive, discomforting and often embarrasses others. Sometimes blind people endure varying degrees of mockery, ridicule and outright prejudice. It is, therefore, vital to protect blind people from those who would take advantage of this vulnerability.

Although legislation has been implemented to level the playing field with respect to blind individuals who use a guide dog, innate prejudice has dominated over justice and resulted in total lack of enforcement of human rights.

In 1974, enlightened politicians passed the B.C. Blind Persons' Rights Act to affirm that the blind had the same public access rights as the sighted. The legislation also made it an offence to deny public service to a person due to their blindness, simply because they were accompanied by their well-trained guide dog. The Act was further strengthened in 1996, 2016 and amended in 2020, to again reinforce that the blind person and their guide dog are one entity.

Using a guide dog has enabled many blind Canadians to more confidently navigate our increasingly busy cities. This freedom has enhanced so many lives with countless uplifting anecdotes and heartwarming stories. Unfortunately, a dark cloud of prejudice and deceit has increasingly damaged this wonderful and vital human-dog partnership.

Over the years, various access violations have increased. Blind people have been subjected to all kinds of abuse. The most prevalent culprits are taxi drivers, who frequently use a variety of fabricated excuses to deny service, sometimes involving whole fleets of cabs. As attention has been drawn to blatant refusals, taxi drivers have adopted cowardice and sneakiness. The driver simply 'hides' in plain view, refusing to identify themselves. This behaviour causes significant reduction in availability, resulting in increased waiting times. To manage this discrimination, taxi companies have created 'exception lists' to not take 'animals' and illegally included blind customers with guide dogs.

For almost 50 years the provincial statute has given blind Canadians equal public access, removing any need for individuals to defend that right. As this equality has already been decided, there should be no need for discussion or debate. Under the Offence Act there is a $288 fine for denial of access to a public place or conveyance.

The lack of enforcement has caused victims to turn in desperation to the BC Human Rights Tribunal (BCHRT). The Tribunal's failure to recognize this lack of enforcement as an error in law is a serious miscarriage of justice. If the rule of law has any value within our legal fraternity, why is it absent where blind people's inequality is concerned?

The B.C. Passenger Transportation Department, the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ministry of the Solicitor General apparently, despite clear legislation, view blind people's rights to be of little consequence. The burden is placed on the blind victim to repeatedly try to single-handedly defend what has already been established in law. Compounding this prejudicial treatment, official new legislation advises blind victims that they can "always turn to the BC Human Rights Tribunal." Government staff and politicians, however, are quite aware that blind victims have already attempted redress, but pernicious human rights case law and prejudice within the Tribunal prevails.

Unbelievably, the Tribunal has “identified discrimination”, but instead of following the human rights code, blind victims are told to "accommodate" the discrimination, causing the prejudice to increase. The Tribunal's "impartiality" assertion is subject to the human element, not principles of justice declared in the code. According to the Tribunal, the purpose of the BCHRT is to identify and eliminate systemic discrimination to be reflected in case law. The Administrative Tribunal Act ensures compliance with the code. Discrimination is allowed to flourish when decisions are contrary to the code.

Pernicious Case Law:

BCHRT Case 7, Dewdney v Bluebird Cabs, Ltd., 2003:

How did this case merit a public hearing? The Complainant did not provide any evidence that she was legally blind. The taxi driver (Respondent) provided only a verbal comment that he could not have a blind person with a guide dog in his taxi. At the hearing, two other guide dog users were witnesses and testified that they had also suffered denials of service. Evidence showed the company had driver ‘exception lists’ to not take ‘animals’ which included blind people with guide dogs.

Factual evidence: At the public hearing, the driver was able to sit alongside three guide dogs in very close proximity for several hours, but claimed he could not have one in his taxi. No one, including the Tribunal Member, remarked on this obvious serious inconsistency. The case was dismissed.

From 2003, denial of service escalated exponentially as drivers felt empowered to discriminate. Many cases of discrimination were filed with the Tribunal, but remain concealed, hidden from scrutiny.

BCHRT Case 12930, indexed McCreath v Victoria Taxi, 2015:

The discrimination occurred when a blind guide dog user was invited by some friends to join their taxi ride. The victim of the discrimination was not involved in ordering the cab. The Tribunal identified that discrimination had occurred, but dismissed the case under S37(1) as unjustified. Instead of protecting the vulnerable, the Tribunal told the blind victim to accept the discrimination. The Respondent disclosed they had 15 drivers out of a fleet of 43 cabs who were on their ‘exception list'. The company allowed drivers to make 'exceptions' that included blind customers with guide dogs.

In this case, an incorrect remark in the Tribunal's decision spoke of a "medical report". No such report existed. Furthermore, the Tribunal's bias and bullying of blind victims is never "justified".

Very recently, a CFB member, once again, attempted redress via the Tribunal after the taxi company initially tried to use two fictitious excuses. When these excuses failed scrutiny, they opted for yet another excuse when responding to the Tribunal. A driver deliberately failed to identify himself to the blind customer and drove off, labelling the call as a no show. The taxi company's discriminatory policy through the exception list accounted for the denial of service. For the Tribunal to have the expectation that a blind customer could ever accurately prove a visual and silent act is, at best, unrealistic. The self-represented blind victim abandoned the case after two years because the Tribunal failed to grant full disclosure of taxi GPS co-ordinates and all communications of the second taxi, which may have explained the sequence of events. Our member's disability seemed to be on trial, along with their ability to navigate the process.

In all these cases the discriminatory exception lists were just euphemisms for discrimination and should have been ordered removed. The Tribunal decision was exercised arbitrarily and in bad faith, as under the code these decisions should have taken into account statutory requirements. Both a legally-protected, disabled group and the strict taxi regulations should have protected blind customers. The consequences have been devastating, resulting in countless humiliating, abusive incidents being left unchecked. Taxi drivers' contempt towards blind customers has become vindictive with drivers deliberately taking advantage of a customer's blindness.

For a blind victim to repeatedly be illegally denied public access and then further victimized through the BCHRT, confirms the degree of prejudice that exists throughout the whole civil service. The destruction of equal public access needs to be addressed without delay.

Numerous meetings with various Ministers and staff members indicate an innate consensus that it is acceptable to undermine blind people's legislated access rights. Various ministry reports confirm this prejudice. Despite the superficial politeness, blind recipients are treated as degenerates who can be simply pacified.

At your suggestion, we wrote and phoned the Ombudsperson's office, Mr. J. Chalke, on several occasions, but have yet to have a response.

In view of all the above prejudicial policies we, at the Canadian Federation of the Blind, urge the province to undertake an extensive investigation into why and for what reason blind people have been targeted for destruction of our legally protected rights.

Very truly yours,

Mary Ellen Gabias, President, Canadian Federation of the Blind

CFB

Announcing Canadian Federation of the Blind's 2022 'Positive Outlook' Convention
– *Come join us!* –

When: Friday, May 6 to Sunday, May 8, 2022

Where: Atrium Inn Vancouver, 2889 East Hastings St. & Everywhere via Zoom!

The CFB 2022 hybrid convention will showcase successes from the last year; connect blind and deafblind Canadians with information and tools; and take on new challenges to forward our equal participation. These annual events are a time for celebration, revitalization and networking. We know blind and deafblind Canadians are ready to come together and this year's convention promises to be one of our best yet! We look forward to catching up with old friends and meeting new friends. Please follow our convention information page www.cfb.ca/cfbc2022. To contact us: convention@cfb.ca

Giving to CFB

Donate Today: Help Change What it Means to be Blind

By donating to the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB), you help make a significant difference in the lives of blind Canadians. Donations are tax-deductible. Registered Charitable Tax Number: 864997291 RR0001

General Donations

General donations are a great way to support CFB programs and on-going efforts to improve equality and opportunity for the blind. Donations can be made online or by mail:

1) Online:

CFB accepts online donations through CanadaHelps, enabling contributions by credit card, Interac or Paypal and receive an instant income tax receipt. Monthly automatic donations can also be set up via CanadaHelps. Please go to: www.cfb.ca and click the CanadaHelps donation button or go to www.canadahelps.org/dn/17020

2) By Mail:

Please make cheque payable to Canadian Federation of the Blind, P.O. Box 8007, Victoria, BC, V8W 3R7

Bequests and Planned Giving

Please consider supporting us in this way. Contact us at info@cfb.ca

Thank you for your kind and generous support!

Donating Aeroplan Points Helps Blind Canadians Attend Blindness Convention

The Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) uses donated points to fly blind Canadians to the next National Federation of the Blind (NFB) blindness convention. These unique week-long gatherings of over 3,000 blind people from around the world are exceptional educational and mentoring experiences. There is no comparable opportunity that offers the blind so much in such an intensive and compact session. Those who have had a chance to attend in the past consider the experience life-changing.

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

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

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

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

Please help us raise points so more blind Canadians can benefit. If you know of anyone who may be interested in donating points, please tell them about this Aeroplan charitable pooling initiative. Thank you for your support.

To donate, please go to: https://donatepoints.aircanada.com/charity/546

Recipe! Bacardi's Famous Rum Cake

This recipe comes from Doris Belusic of Victoria, BC. She credits her husband's sister, Marina, and brother-in-law, Ben, for introducing her to this tasty treat and for the many slices she's enjoyed over the years!

Cake Ingredients:

1 c. chopped pecans or walnuts (to sprinkle on bottom of pan)
1 (18 1/2 oz.) package yellow cake mix (dry)
1 (3 3/4 oz.) package Jell-O Vanilla Instant Pudding and Pie Filling (dry)
4 eggs
1/2 c. cold water
1/2 c. oil
1/2 c. Bacardi dark rum (or other flavourful rum, i.e. spiced rum)

Rum Glaze:

1/4 lb. or 1/2 c. butter, cubed
1/4 c. water
1 c. granulated sugar
1/2 c. Bacardi dark rum

Directions:

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Grease and flour a 10-inch tube pan or a 12-cup bundt pan. Sprinkle nuts over the bottom of the pan. Set aside.
Mix all cake ingredients together. Pour batter over nuts in prepared pan.
Bake 1 hour. Cool in pan on rack. Invert cake onto a serving plate.

For the Glaze:

Melt butter in a saucepan. Stir in water and sugar. Boil 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from heat. Stir in rum.
Prick the top of the cake. Drizzle and smooth glaze evenly over top and sides. Allow cake to absorb the glaze completely. Repeat until glaze is used up. (Have wax paper underneath and continue to scoop up the glaze and add it until the cake is saturated.)

This is a rich, moist cake. A dollop of whipped cream can be added for a special touch.

Source: The Bacardi Party Book by Bacardi Imports, Inc., 1970's

“Two freedoms diverge into the future, and we —
We chose the one to set the blind free,
And that has made all the difference.”

~ Mark Riccobono, NFB President, from his 2019 NFB (US) convention banquet address, “Choice, Exploration and Resistance: The Road to Freedom for the Blind” (with a nod to Robert Frost’s poem,“The Road Not Taken.”)