

NCBM OUTREACH



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Dato' S. Kulasegaran

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DEVELOPMENT IN NCBM AND WORK FOR THE BLIND 2008

*By Ivan Ho Tuck Choy
Executive Director
National Council for the Blind, Malaysia*



Editor's Note: This article is based on the Annual Report 2008 of NCBM and which was tabled at the Annual General Meeting of NCBM on 25 July, 2009. It is as follows:

1. HEARTIEST CONGRATULATIONS

Let us begin by extending felicitations to the following persons and organisations that we know have received recognition for their outstanding contributions or who have been appointed to undertake responsible assignments:

- 1.1 Dato' S. Kulasegaran, President of NCBM, on being elected the Vice-President of the World Blind Union-Asia Pacific at its Quadrennial Regional Assembly in Geneva in August 2008.
- 1.2 En. Mah Hassan bin Haji Omar, Vice-President of NCBM, who qualified as a trained chess instructor of the ASEAN Chess Academy with full accreditation by the World Chess Federation

in December 2008, thus becoming the first blind Malaysian chess instructor.

- 1.3 Dr S. Radha Krishnan, Chairman of the NCBM Committee on Sports and Recreation, on being conferred an honorary doctorate by a Russian university in December 2008 for his community services.

- 1.4 St. Nicholas Home, on being given the status of an accredited testing centre (ATA) for conducting the International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL) courses for disabled and non-disabled persons in December 2008. It was the first organisation serving persons with disabilities in the country to have been given this high recognition and trust.

2. THE 22ND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2008

In the address by the President of NCBM, Dato' S. Kulasegaran, he touched on two significant events that had taken place. They were:

- 2.1 The passage of the Persons with Disabilities Act in Parliament on 18 December 2007.
- 2.2 The holding of the National Web Accessibility Conference

in April to create awareness among website developers on the needs of the disabled, especially the blind, for accessible websites.

3. THE PLAN OF ACTION

The Exco has given great attention to the implementation of this plan covering three levels of activities. Firstly, working directly with member-organisations and assisting them in their projects. Secondly, organising events on the national level. Thirdly, working actively on the international level, particularly with the World Blind Union, the WBU-Asia Pacific, the WBUAP South-East Asia Regional Committee, the International Blind Sports Association (IBSA), and the DAISY Consortium.

4. WORKING WITH MEMBER-ORGANISATIONS

Some of the actions taken in 2008 were as follows:

4.1 Sabah Society for the Blind

4.1.1 In response to an appeal from them to continue sponsoring their Job Placement Unit, NCBM agreed to continue the sponsorship with a sum of RM40,000 for another year. This was in view of their difficulties in raising sufficient funds and the encouraging initiatives made in exploring new forms of self-employment for the blind.

4.1.2 As requested by SHSB, a course in the use of the Braille embosser was conducted for the benefit of their new staff. The course was conducted

by Mr. Moses Choo, NCBM Assistant Executive Director, in Kota Kinabalu from 16 - 17 October, 2008.

4.1.3 A computer training workshop, funded by NCBM, was conducted for twelve participants from 9 – 14 November, 2008. It was very encouraging to note that one of the main instructors is himself a blind Sabahan.

4.2 Sarawak Society for the Blind

4.2.1 A computer training workshop for ten participants was held from 8 – 13 December, 2008. The training team comprised instructors from St. Nicholas Home and the Malaysian Association for the Blind, which clearly demonstrated that there were cordial working relations among the staff of NCBM and member-organisations.

4.2.2 With the setting up of the ICT Resource Centre in the Kuching branch of SKSB, NCBM had started paying the allowance for a part-time support worker for three years.

4.2.3 NCBM had also given financial assistance to the Kuching branch for their mushroom cultivation project. Advice and guidance are given by the Agricultural Research and Development Institute.

4.2.4 After several disappointing attempts in getting the Job Placement Unit started in SKSB, they have finally

managed to recruit a Placement Officer who reported for duty on 9 June, 2008. The Unit had since also employed a part-time clerk. The total annual budget of RM50,000 was provided by NCBM and the sponsorship scheme will continue for a period of three years.

4.2.5 NCBM together with the Tun Hussein Onn National Eye Hospital organised the visit of the Orbit International Flying Hospital from 28 January to 8 February, 2008. This helped to create the much needed publicity in Sarawak resulting in a successful outcome.

4.3 St. Nicholas Home

4.3.1 Regarding the project to digitise more than one thousand analogue recordings into DAISY format, NCBM had agreed to provide 50% of the cost of around RM60,000. However, slow progress is being made because of the difficulty in recruiting a full-time coordinator with the necessary expertise to speed up the project.

4.3.2 As with the past two years, SNH had been working closely with NCBM in fulfilling the contract secured by NCBM for the production of Braille textbooks for the Bahagian Buku Teks (BBT) under the Ministry of Education. They managed to increase their production to two titles consisting of several volumes and sets.

4.3.3 At their request, NCBM and SNH jointly organised

an awareness programme for 51 undergraduates taking up Special Education on Assistive Technology at the University Science Malaysia. However, it was learnt that only nine of the undergraduates were pursuing the teaching degree in the blindness field.

Thus, it had been decided that more of such awareness talks to target groups such as the employers and web designers would be very helpful.

4.4 Society of the Blind in Malaysia

4.4.1 In terms of working together to improve the services and to uplift the well being of blind people, SBM had contributed several ideas which have been incorporated into the NCBM Plan of Action as follows:

- (a) To work towards a uniform curriculum for massage and reflexology training for the blind in the country. Consequently, Dato’ Dr Hsiung Kwo Yeun, one of the Exco members and President of SKSB, had been appointed to look into the matter.
- (b) To hold a national employment conference to identify ways to help blind people in all aspects of employment. The conference was held on 23 July, 2008.
- (c) To hold a National Women’s Seminar to discuss issues concerning the economic empowerment and participation of blind women with the aim of

setting up a committee for the purpose. Although the seminar did not materialise, this led to the setting up of the NCBM Committee for the Advancement of Blind Women chaired by Mrs. Clarice Irene Moiji.

4.4.2 NCBM contributed RM10,000 towards the SBM Entrepreneurship Development Fund which was launched by their President, En. Mah Hassan, on 17 May, 2008.

4.5 Malaysian Association for the Blind

4.5.1 As a leading organisation providing services for the blind, MAB is well respected as a pioneer in many areas, and their advice and expertise are sought by member-organisations and other bodies having connection with blindness-specific issues. Thus, MAB had cooperated with NCBM in conducting computer training courses in Sabah and Sarawak. In turn, NCBM had made available opportunities for some MAB personnel to attend international training courses, particularly in projects with the DAISY Consortium and sporting events with IBSA.

4.5.2 NCBM had supported MAB’s drive to raise funds for the upgrading of the Taman Harapan Agricultural Centre in Temerloh, Pahang by subscribing to a dinner-table for ten persons held in July 2008.

In the same year, NCBM also

supported the efforts of MAB by contributing RM74,000 towards the organising of the 12th ICEVI World Conference.

(to be continued)

It’s easy to make

a buck. It’s a lot

tougher to make a

difference.

Tom Brokaw, US

Newsreader

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. PASSING AWAY OF MAB PRESIDENT

The MAB President, Senator Prof. Datuk Dr Ismail bin Mohd Salleh, passed away on Thursday, 27 August, 2009 at the age of sixty-one. His death was due to cardiac arrest en route from China to Singapore on his return journey to Malaysia. Prior to this, he had been suffering from diabetes and renal failure.

With heartfelt sympathy and deep sorrow, we convey our condolences to the wife and family of Senator Prof. Datuk Dr Ismail Salleh. His contributions to society, especially to MAB, are greatly appreciated and will be long remembered.

2. DATO' L. KRISHNAN IS CONFERRED HONOURARY DOCTORATE DEGREE

Dato' L. Krishnan, Chairman of the MAB Sports and Recreation Committee, was conferred the doctorate degree by Kursk University of Russia on 1 July, 2009 at the Tun Hussein Onn National Eye Hospital (THONEH). This was in recognition of his contributions to the development of the film industry of Malaysia. He initiated many new ideas in film-making and through his Gaya Films Company, film stars such as P. Ramli got their first break to become popular and successful in Malaysia and beyond.

We extend our hearty congratulations to Dato' L. Krishnan.

3. FAREWELL TO SAERAH MANAB AND KANAE KASUDA

Thursday, 11 June, 2009 was the last day of service for Cik Saerah Manab as GTC Matron and canteen supervisor of MAB. She had served the Association for a period of about twenty years. We take this opportunity to extend to her heartfelt thanks and wish her all the best in her future undertakings.

On the following Thursday, 18 June, MAB bid farewell to Kanae Kasuda. During her one-year stint on attachment with the MAB Sports and Recreation Department, she had made an important contribution to MAB and the work for the blind in Malaysia, especially in the field of sports and games. She helped to initiate physical training and swimming programmes in a number of institutions for the blind.

We wish her every success in her future undertakings back in Japan as she launches out into her new career.

4. VISION MAB

This is MAB's new bulletin which started publication at the beginning of 2009. Only print copies are available at present. Those wishing to subscribe for the magazine, please contact Mr Ramdas Nayar at the MAB, tel : 03-22722677 ext 129.

5. JABATAN PEMBANGUNAN OKU (OKU DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT)

Formally known as the Bahagian Pembangunan OKU, this section has been upgraded to a department since May 2009. It is a department of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and is housed at the Menara Tun Ismail Md. Ali in Kuala Lumpur.

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REMEMBERING SENATOR PROF. DATUK DR ISMAIL BIN MOHD SALLEH

Born in Pasir Mas, Kelantan, Ismail bin Mohd Salleh became the first blind person in the world to obtain a doctorate in economics from the state university of New York, USA, an achievement that made it into the Guinness Book of World Records. He was also the first from among the disabled community in Malaysia to have been appointed as Senator in the Malaysian Parliament in December 2007.

His determination and dedication led to his holding to a number of key positions such as the first Vice Chancellor of Twintech International University College, Chief Executive Officer of Twintech Holdings Sdn Bhd, and President of the National Association of Bumiputera Colleges. He also served as a member of the National Implementation Task Force in the Prime Minister's Department and as Deputy Director-General of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

As a specialist in fiscal economics, macro-economics, project evaluation and industrial economics, his opinions were often sought for by government and private agencies. He regularly raised concerns about the country's economic development, in particular with regards to the affirmative actions implemented under the new economic policy. Indeed, as a leading economist from Malaysia, he was regularly

consulted on the international level.

As President of the Malaysian Association for the Blind, Senator Prof. Datuk Dr Ismail Salleh had accomplished much for the betterment and upliftment of the blind in this country. His achievements included reviving the Braille Publishing Unit, establishing the e-business links for sale of adaptive equipment, setting up of the ICT department, completion of the new hostel for GTC trainees, gaining recognition for Kompleks MAB as the national centre of excellence in sports for the blind, providing the encouragement and boost for the first team of blind persons in Malaysia to climb Gunung Tahan, initiating the Brickfields barrier-free pilot project for the blind, advocating and promoting business entrepreneurship among the blind, and most significantly for having led in the campaign to reach every blind and disabled child by 2015 with the objective of fulfilling the goal of "education for all".

Truly, the memories of Senator Prof. Datuk Dr Ismail as an exemplary leader and a trail-blazer in so many fields, particularly in the advocacy work and struggles of the blind, will have a permanent place in our hearts.

We appreciate you and your contributions, Senator Prof. Datuk Dr Ismail bin Mohd Salleh,

beloved President of MAB. May you be richly blessed in the life hereafter.

Choose your
pleasures for
yourself, and do not
let them be imposed
upon you.

Lord Chesterfield

**APPRECIATION FROM DATIN
HASNAH, WIFE OF THE LATE
SENATOR PROF. DATUK DR
ISMAIL BIN MOHD SALLEH**

On this occasion of great sadness and grief with the passing away of my loving husband, Senator Prof. Datuk Dr Ismail bin Mohd Salleh on 27 August, 2009, I would like to take this opportunity to express very sincere and grateful thanks for the kind gestures of sympathy and condolences from so many friends and well-wishers. Our hearts are deeply touched by the expressions of goodwill and concern that have been extended to me and my family.

We are truly thankful for your warmth and your sharing in our sorrow for the loss of not only a loving husband and family man but also of a great leader and contributor to society. We are greatly encouraged and very much comforted in knowing that Senator Prof. Datuk Dr Ismail Salleh will be remembered for a long time to come because of his dedication and services to the nation and country, especially in the upliftment of humanity through the work of MAB which he had served as president for many years and to which he had dedicated much of his time and energy in order to help bring about a better deal for the blind in this country.

I am indeed blessed and privileged to have been the life partner of such a worthy man as Ismail Salleh. I thank God and everyone

of you for your loving concern and kindness towards me and my family.

It is difficult to say
what is impossible,
for the dream of
yesterday is the hope
of today and the
reality of tomorrow.

Robert H. Goddard

Women are making
it very clear that
they do not want
to choose between
succeeding at home
or succeeding at
work. They want to
succeed in life.

Dato' Seri

Sharizat Abdul

Jalil, Minister of

Women, Family

and Community

Development

UNFORGETTABLE MEMORIES

Part II

By Nicholas Lam

Editor's Note: *Nicholas Lam (totally blind) has worked at St. Nicholas Home in Penang for four decades. He would like to share with us his personal experiences and unforgettable memories through a series of short articles. Here is the second of his articles.*

SPORTS

When I was in kindergarten and standard one, the teacher used to turn on a radio programme called “music and movement” with Aishah Akbar. Appropriate tunes would be played and the children would do the actions such as a horse galloping, a rabbit hopping and skipping, and so on. This programme went on for quite a number of years.

The “music and movement” programme helped to prepare us children for the real physical education exercises later on. So I was able to do a lot of skipping during our PE classes. We could skip singly or with a partner. We challenged each other to see who could skip the longest without stopping.

From standard three upwards, every Tuesday morning was swimming day at the Penang Swimming Club and it was a “must” for all the blind children. The senior class would be the first to go at 8.30 am. One Tuesday

morning, the pool was being cleaned and it was only half full; so we could not swim at the shallow end. Mrs Sims, our swimming instructor, told some of us to cling on to her and we walked slowly towards the deep end. There was a sudden drop and I lost a footing; I found that I could not reach the bottom. I lost my hold and began to struggle. I was fighting for my life and I thought I was going to drown. Suddenly, Mrs Sims got hold of me and pulled me to the side where I had to sit until the period was over. This happened not long after I went to standard three.

Despite that incident, I was not afraid of the water. In fact, I was able to improve my swimming skills. Each time we passed a certain level of ability, a button was sewn onto our swimming trunk. I managed to collect four or five buttons.

The crawl was the first swimming style to be taught. Later on, I learned the breast stroke. Somehow I could never master the butterfly stroke and I always went crooked with the backstroke. Until today, I still prefer the breast stroke because I find it so relaxing and less vigorous.

In 1962 we had a new PE teacher by the name of Miss Oh. She was a new graduate from a ballet school and she made us do ballet-style exercises, ie we exercised

in time to piano music played by one of the teachers. We had to do certain exercises lying face down. However, we teenage boys had a problem – doing exercises in this position caused an erection. So when we stood up, Miss Oh would innocently ask, “Boys, what’s that sticking up your pants?”

For the annual sports day, the main events would be team relays with variations such as the three-legged race and the sack race. Straightforward sprinting was also included.

Then, in 1963, we had a new teacher by the name of Miss Patricia Johnson (later she became Mrs Thiru). Together with Mr William G. Brohier, who was then the school principal, new athletic events were introduced which included the shot putt, discus, javelin, long jump and high jump. The field was lengthened to cater for the 100-metre race and it was widened in order to accommodate more spectators. A sand-pit was dug for the high jump and long jump and Mrs Thiru became our trainer.

At the same time, a gymnastic team was formed and new equipment was purchased. We did all kinds of somersaults, including cart-wheeling with a partner. Vaulting over the box with different styles and pyramid formations were the common events taught to us.

I was one of those who could do a head-stand. So as the other boys piled on top of each other to form the pyramid, I would do my head-stand in front. Photographs were taken and they may still be in the records of St. Nicholas.

There was an incident that I will never forget. I was doing the 100-metre sprint while Jimmy Boyle, the famous musician and composer, was squatting down and holding a stop-watch timer to time my run. As I approached, he could not get up in time to avoid me; I ran straight into him and we both fell. He was rushed to hospital and it was thought that he had suffered a heart attack. Mr Brohier took me to see him at the hospital and I apologised for the accident. In fact, Mr Boyle actually died of a heart attack a couple of years later through no fault of mine.

I truly enjoyed those years of sporting and swimming and I actively participated in many of the sports meets and carnivals. I managed to win a few medals but I was never the champion!

SUPPORT OUR CAUSE

The National Council for the Blind, Malaysia (NCBM) provides a vital link between the organisations serving the blind in this country by acting as the national coordinating body. Through NCBM, the organisations for and of the blind have a channel to discuss and formulate national policies and plans and to pioneer new programmes for the benefit of the blind.

Your financial support will, therefore, go a long way in helping to bring about new developments and progress for the blind. All contributions are deeply appreciated.

Donations should be made in the name of the National Council for the Blind, Malaysia. Address:

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SPECIAL ANNOUNCE- MENT

Readers are reminded that their contribution of articles, suggestions and jokes are most welcome for inclusion in "The NCBM Outreach". However, please note that it would be very helpful to the Editor if such contributions could be submitted either on diskette or on single-sided Braille pages to facilitate editing.

Also please remember to include your name, address and telephone number.

For details of payment, please see the last page.

The further I look
into the past, the
clearer I can see into
the future

Dr Collin Abraham,

Writer of the Book

"The Finest Hour"

NEWS FROM THE MALAYSIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

NEW JOB PLACEMENT BROCHURE

The MAB Job Placement Unit has produced a new and more comprehensive job placement brochure. There is a list in the brochure which indicates forty-three kinds of jobs that have been undertaken by the blind in Malaysia.

The launching ceremony was held at the hall of Kompleks MAB in Brickfields on Tuesday, 28 July, 2009. The ceremony was officiated by the Deputy Minister of Human Resources, Dato' Maznah Mazlan.

Those interested in having a copy of the new job placement brochure can contact En. Zainuddin Jasmi or Pn. Jacqueline Emanuel at tel : 22722677 ext 122 or ext 175 respectively.

GOVERNMENT GETS AGGRESSIVE ON JOBS FOR THE BLIND

The government is stepping up efforts to employ more blind people and it wants the private sector to do the same. The Deputy Human Resource Minister, Dato' Maznah Mazlan, said this when she commented that the government's plan to reserve 1% of civil sector jobs for the disabled was still off target with only 850 disabled persons having been given jobs in the public sector so far.

Besides taking aggressive steps to fill the civil service quota, the Human Resource Ministry will also discuss ways for a similar quota to be implemented in the private sector. Dato' Maznah said this when she launched the MAB job placement campaign on Tuesday, 28 July, 2009.

"The Ministry took the first step in 2001 by producing the wage structure guidebook for private sector employers wishing to hire handicapped persons," she added. "At present we are urging the private sector to give first priority to suitably qualified handicapped persons for jobs such as call-centre operators and receptionists."

According to Dato' Maznah, a total number of 10,699 disabled persons had registered for jobs with the Labour Department since July 2009. Jobs have been found for 7,482 of them.

To improve the opportunities of the disabled for employment, the thrice-monthly job fairs organised by the Human Resource Ministry will include a separate booth for disabled job-seekers. More job fairs are being held in view of the current economic downturn.

Dato' Maznah said that the Ministry had also allocated RM22 million for disabled entrepreneurs who are able to provide jobs for other disabled persons.

DBKL MEETING WITH BLIND MASSAGE ENTERPRISE OWNERS

Over the past two years of 2008 and 2009, MAB has been organising dialogues with the blind masseurs in order to find solutions to the challenges facing them. Relevant government authorities, particularly DBKL, have been invited to the dialogues to suggest how the problems could be resolved.

At a meeting with DBKL in August 2009, the Director-General, Dato' Haji Salleh bin Yusup, agreed that a final answer should be given to the requests tabled by the massage representatives as follows:

1. The old rate for floor space should be maintained with regards to the premises of massage centres run by blind massage enterprise owners. The old rate was RM12 per square foot.
2. A compound fee of RM300 only need to be paid for licence renewal.
3. The deposit for blind massage enterprise owners will be RM2,000 only instead of RM10,000 (which is being imposed for sighted massage centres).

+

MAB COLLABORATION WITH PLAY BY EAR SDN BHD

MAB has been collaborating with Play By Ear Sdn Bhd since 2006 to provide opportunities for the blind to take up music courses through a special scholarship programme. About ten blind persons have already benefited from the programme.

On 6 July 2009, five of the blind graduates performed for a concert at the MAB hall. They included two school students, two masseurs and one deaf-blind person.

ONE HUNDRED MILLIONTH PASSENGER FOR MONORAIL

In July 2009, Monorail had reached the target of one hundred million passengers and prizes were presented to the winners at the Bukit Bintang Train Station. James Mong Ah Sang was the lucky representative for the blind; he received a Sony DVD player and radio set as his prize.

VIETNAM BLIND ASSOCIATION VISITS MALAYSIA

Visitors from the Vietnam Blind Association made their first visit to Kuala Lumpur during the first week of June 2009. Representatives from NCBM and its member-organisations (including MAB) had a working dinner meeting with the Vietnam visitors on 2 June and a number of interesting proposals were tabled to bring about bilateral and regional exchange of information and expertise. Suggestions

included sharing expertise on massage training, organising cultural and musical concerts and holding of sports and games to promote the ASEAN spirit among the blind.

COMPUTER DONATED BY YAM TONG WOO

Yam Tong Woo, a member of the Elderly Blind Club, has donated a computer to be used at the Elderly Blind Centre in Kompleks MAB, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. In addition, he also provides computer lessons free of charge at the Centre. His main objective is to encourage the elderly blind to become computer literate.

Yam himself became blind quite recently while on a business trip to China about two years ago. However, with the help of the MAB rehabilitation and IT programmes, he has adjusted very well to his new situation. In fact, he was elected as chairman of the MAB Cyber Club in early 2009.

KTM MAKES ITS TRAIN STATIONS ACCESSIBLE TO THE DISABLED

On 1 July 2009, representatives from MAB and other disabled groups were invited to visit the Taman Wah Yu train station of KTM. According to the KTM management, the Taman Wah Yu station would be the first of five stations to be installed with accessible features for the blind and other disabled persons. If the pilot project is successful, KTM would introduce the facilities to all its other stations as well.

GURNEY TRAINING CENTRE

The GTC has to date trained up to 1,800 blind persons through its rehabilitation and vocational programmes. Types of courses have been increased and accredited for better value and more favourable employment opportunities. For example, the telephony course has now been replaced by the Office Administrative Assistants course.

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING FOR KUALA LUMPUR

MAB was invited to take part in a meeting convened by the Town and Planning Board of KL on 9 July, 2009. The objective of the discussions was to come up with standard guidelines in carrying out various planning activities for town and country development.

In formulating the guidelines on access for the disabled to public facilities, it was decided that the actual title should now be "guidelines on Universal Design for a Barrier-free Environment for the Disabled"; this would be more in keeping with the idea of universal design being promoted by the United Nations since 2002.

Other interesting guidelines pertaining to roof-top gardens, open spaces, golf courses and even Rakan Muda were given consideration. One day perhaps roof gardens will become a common feature in Malaysia as we join the international challenge to prevent the earth from warming up.

POLICY ON THE DISABLED IN HIGHER EDUCATION

About three years ago (2006), MAB had submitted a memorandum to the Ministry of Higher Education requesting for a special department on higher education for the disabled to be established in the Ministry. On 10 July this year (2009), MAB was invited to a meeting convened by the Ministry of Higher Education. The objective was to formulate a plan to conduct research among a number of target groups regarding the needs of the disabled in tertiary education. The groups included disabled undergraduates, university staff, lecturers, and so on. A policy will then be formulated aimed at improving the situation of the disabled in tertiary education.

WEB ACCESSIBILITY FOR THE BLIND IN MALAYSIA

A campaign was organised by the MAB IT Department on 25 June, 2009 at the MAB hall. The main objective of the campaign was to promote accessible websites in Malaysia.

With accessible websites, the blind would be able to navigate independently and freely using the keyboard commands. An important feature would be the availability of text which would accompany the pictorial presentations.

According to En. Silatul Rahim, IT Manager, this was a significant step forward with regards to the development and progress of technology for the blind in Malaysia.

EXCURSION TO PULAU KETAM FOR REAL

By Eddy Chong Ted Hin

Editor's Note: Readers will remember the article, "You Are Blind – Can You Go to Pulau Ketam?" written by Eddy Chong Ted Hin which appeared in "The NCBM Outreach" of July – September 2009. By carrying out the recce trip to Pulau Ketam on 11 February 2009, he had proved to his sighted critics that it is possible for blind persons to make the trip to the island. Through the survey visit, Eddy together with a small group of blind friends was able to prepare the way for the real excursion which took place from 15 - 16 May, 2009.

Here is what he says:

The day of real testing came at long last on Friday, 15 May, 2009. All of us gathered at McDonalds of KL Sentral Station early in the morning at 7.00 am. The group consisted of 20 blind persons and twenty sighted volunteers. Armed with the badges on our shirts and blouses (given by KTM to indicate the train tickets we had purchased earlier), we split into groups of about ten each and made our way to the train. Those who arrive at the Port Klang Station first would wait for the other groups.

At Port Klang, we had to find our way to the temporary landing site for the ferry as the existing pier was closed due to a recent

accident. We had to wait for quite a while for our ferry to come right to the edge of the landing as there were several other ferries struggling to get out into the open sea. Finally, our ferry came to the edge and we all got in with great excitement.

Some of the blind were surprised that we were the only ones on the ferry and, in fact, discovered that we were actually in a tongkang (or Chinese junk). At first they were rather disappointed but they soon became joyful when they realised that the tongkang was a far better experience than the ferry – they were thrilled to feel the sea-breezes blowing and smell the salty ocean and it was so cool even though the ship was not air-conditioned; the tongkang was so spacious because it was meant for one hundred passengers but only forty of us were on board. One of the blind participants, James Mong, was so happy that he began shouting out, "fifteen men on a dead man's chest, yo hoho and a bottle of rum!"

After about forty-five minutes at around 11.15 am., the tongkang came to a stop and everyone got ready to disembark for Pulau Ketam. Then, to their dismay, the captain announced that since they were picking up a passenger near the fish-farm, they would be visiting the farm first before going to Pulau Ketam. However, they calmed down eventually when

they learned that if they were to take a separate trip to the fish-farm, it would have cost them an extra RM12.00 for the ticket. Thus, we all went down to the farm but were again disappointed because there was no one to provide any briefing or explanations about the farm.

As I had described in my previous article regarding our initial recce visit to the island, there was the two-foot bridge separating the resting area of the farm from the chalets where visitors could do their own fishing. One of the participants, Godfrey Ooi, squatted down on the bridge and put his hand in the water of the nets suspended in the ocean. Suddenly, he got the jolt of his life as one of the big fish snapped at his fingers, thinking they were tasty morsels.

Nothing else seemed to be very interesting and after a short stay, everyone filed back into the tongkang for Pulau Ketam. At the Sea-lion, Mr Cheah the hotel manager (who was also penghulu of the island), promised to make up for the disappointment by providing a tour round the island at 5.30 pm. We then dispersed in groups for the restaurants nearby to the hotel for a sumptuous lunch of seafood – chilly crab, crispy prawns, steamed fish, shellfish (or lala), etc.

After lunch most of us decided to explore the island instead of returning to the hotel. As we walked, one of the volunteers nearly fell off the edge of the road to the beach below. We were actually high above the beach which was not really accessible except by boat during the high

tide. Some of us began to wonder how a blind person would be able to live on Pulau Ketam with such hazards as high drop-offs, absence of railings, and so on.

Sharp at 5.30 pm. Mr Cheah was as good as his word and he was ready to take us around the island. The first stop was at the market where Mr Cheah showed us the old and modern nets used to catch crabs and dig up shellfish. With the old nets, only two crabs could be caught at a time but they were frequently able to escape capture. With the new nets, six crabs could be caught at one time and there was only one way left for them – into the hungry stomachs of human beings!

As for the shellfish, the old method was to wait for the high tide when they would be very visible on the surface of the sand and ready for the picking. With the new method, man did not need to wait patiently for nature – he simply scooped up the shellfish any time he liked – mature ones together with younger ones along with eggs and everything else that got in the way of the combing nets! At first the catch was bountiful but with succeeding years and even months, the catch was diminishing fast. The new method was, in fact, rather wasteful indeed – not only were the shellfish beds being depleted at a rapid rate but the environment was also being spoiled and many other sea-creatures were being destroyed.

After visiting a number of other sites, Mr Cheah announced that we would be heading for the temple of the “kura” so that we were expecting to find a pond of tortoises there. Those of us who

arrived first hunted high and low for the pond but saw nothing. Then Mr Cheah pulled up from the rear and led us to the solitary statue of a very large tortoise. He explained that when the first inhabitants came to the island in the second half of the 20th century, ie about fifty years ago, they discovered the real tortoise living in the salty water of the marshy area. Feeling in awe and reverence for the tortoise, they took it out of the water to take care of it like a special deity. In about two weeks or so the tortoise died and a statue of the tortoise was made for its worshippers to revere.

According to Mr Cheah, one had to approach the tortoise statue in a special way. You had to kneel down in front of the tortoise and slowly approach it in order to touch its front legs. Then you would gently move to the head, neck, body and down to the back legs. You could then move to the posterior of the tortoise and feel the eggs about to be laid. You could then make your wish for prosperity and a good life.

Mr Cheah also gave us some interesting facts about the island. Three Hainanese men originally came to the island some years ago and discovered that it was a rich fishing area. At first they came to cart away fish in boat-loads for sale. Eventually they decided it would be much more economical to erect a hut and processing site on the island. Soon more Hainanese people settled on the island. Later those who spoke the Teochiu dialect also settled on the island. The settlement eventually grew into a town of more than 10,000 people with schools, post

office, police station and twenty-four Taoist and Buddhist temples. Proper electrical supply was installed only about three years ago while clean water supply was provided only one year ago. Two other islands closely connected with Pulau Ketam are Pulau Indah and Pulau Carey inhabited mostly by Malays and by Indians respectively.

Next day some of us went to the market, others went to the landing pier for fresh fish, while another group decided to pay for the RM12.00 ticket to the fish-farm. The way to the landing pier was truly a sight to behold – the houses were in all sorts of colours and patterns, each according to the individual tastes of the owners. You could really get close to the edge of the pier and put your hands into the calm sea. And the fish was in such abundance and variety for sale to the market.

At one stage, somebody's white cane fell through a hole on the bridge. One of the volunteers was a young boy and his shouts of panic and excitement caught quite a stir. However, the incident was soon over with the help of one of the workers there (we were told that he was an aborigine who had been brought to the island). He carefully climbed down a ladder and picked up the cane. In gratitude, the blind participant persuaded the worker to accept RM3.00 which he did so quite reluctantly.

Meanwhile, the group that went to the fish-farm was having great fun. This time the interpreter was on hand to explain how the farm was being operated. I was with that group and I was taking one of

the blind participant, Eugene Hng, across the narrow bridge to have a look at the fishing chalets.

Another low-vision participant, Taslim Kosni, decided to follow me from behind. Suddenly, I heard a big splash and I thought someone must have caught a very big fish. Then I looked over my shoulder and saw Taslim splashing in the water as he tried to pull himself out of the net. Later on he told us that he was so scared of being bitten by the fish. Actually, he need not have been scared because he had fallen into the net where the young small fish were being reared – but how was he to know? The man who was describing the farm quickly came and pulled him out. He was dripping from head to foot and one of his shoes was lost while the other was heavy with water. Some fifty-ringgit notes in the pocket of his pants were all wet.

Fortunately, he had left his handphone with one of the participants, Patricia Lee, who was blind and partially deaf. She helped him to dry the money by slowly and gently wiping them dry with tissue-paper. It was Patricia's mother who had seen Taslim falling into the water and who had been screaming her head off with panic and fear.

But Taslim was a real gentleman – he did not make any fuss whatsoever about the accident and was, in fact, very apologetic to the owner of the farm. They took him to the bathroom on the platform of the fish-farm and gave him some dry clothes but they were too small for him. So he put back on his wet clothes and the heavy water-laden shoes – the lost shoe

had been fished out of the water. As he walked back from the pier to the hotel, he was careful to hide the tear along the front of his pants – the rip had been caused as he was trying to swing his legs up onto the bridge from the water.

Initially, the incident was kept as a top secret for fear of embarrassment and especially what the sighted might think about it. However, when I told this to Godfrey Ooi, who was blind and he was the coordinator of the trip, he burst out laughing and told me there was nothing to fear. He said that blind people were like sighted people – they should be allowed to take risks and no one should be blamed for unforeseen mishaps that may occur. After all careful attention had been paid to make sure the trip was quite safe by providing volunteers and insurance coverage. Moreover, the recce trip had been made in order to gather information, particularly about the caution that had to be taken at the fish-farm.

In fact, Taslim had actually been very careful but the unexpected occurred. While crossing the two-foot bridge, he saw a pillar and tried to hold on to it. Unfortunately, the pillar moved because it was tied to the bridge which was floating on the water. He had expected the pillar to be stable but it was not and this had caused him to fall. After a couple of days, Taslim recovered from the shock and some minor injuries. Nevertheless, he would always dismiss the incident with a hearty laugh whenever the subject was brought up.

Truly, I would like to thank Taslim and the other organising

committee members for their effort and contribution in making the trip so successful – it was truly a memorable experience! I am so grateful for having been given the opportunity and trust to be the organising chairman. I also deeply appreciate the cooperation given by Godfrey Ooi, Ramdas Nair and Shirene Tan Chai Chin who were the other members of the organising committee.

Never let a small problem, even if it looks simple, grow big until it cannot be fixed.

No matter how difficult a challenge, it can be overcome if people are prepared to collaborate.

Dr Moshe
Rubinstein, Guru of
Strategy

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE: THE VICTOR READER STREAM – MORE THAN AN IPOD FOR THE BLIND

By Moses Choo Siew Cheong

Assistant Director

National Council for the Blind, Malaysia

The Victor Reader Stream (sometimes called the VR Stream or simply the Stream) is a handheld, highly versatile audio book reader, music player, and digital audio recorder. Developed and sold by HumanWare, a leader in technology for the blind, the VR Stream has, since its release in 2007, found its way into the hands of thousands of blind people throughout the country and around the world. There is something about the VR Stream that grabs your attention.

Approximately 4.5 inches long, 2.5 inches wide and over three-quarters of an inch thick, the VR Stream is powered by a rechargeable (and easily replaceable) battery that will run for fifteen hours on a full charge. It has a small built-in speaker helpful in checking the status of the unit. However, for listening to books, music, etc, an external speaker or a pair of good headphones works much better.

It also has an SD (Secure Digital) card slot, a built-in microphone, and jacks to connect external speakers or microphones. Every book or song on the VR Stream is stored on an SD card, available at any electronics store. The larger the SD card's capacity, the more information you can carry on your

VR Stream.

Remember that if you do not have ready access to a computer and a fast connection to the internet, the VR Stream will not be of any real value to you because it cannot connect directly to the internet. Without such a connection, you will not be able to access the wealth of digital books and other materials there. The computer is essential as the repository of digital books, music, and other audio material that you can copy to the VR Stream using the familiar Windows Explorer.

For the VR Stream's music player, each album is stored in a folder and each song is saved as an MP3 file. As you copy each folder of songs from your computer to the VR Stream, you tell the Stream which album you want to play. Folders and files are sorted alphabetically by name, and by default the VR Stream plays everything in file name order. Music can also be played randomly. You can move fairly quickly to specific albums or songs with a few simple commands. While the music is playing, it is easy to move back and forth between songs. The audio quality is decent – especially if you have a good set of headphones or speakers.

The audio recorder can be used for meetings and lectures and you can hear everyone in the room. During a meeting you can pause the recording without losing your place. However, if you want to listen to the recordings on your computer, you will need to convert them into the standard wave file format using the freely available and easily installed VR Stream Companion software.

To record quick messages, simply press and hold down the record button. Every time a recording is started, it tells you that recording has started. Thus, the VR Stream may be better as a recorder for lectures and meetings than for recording short messages.

The most exciting aspect is its ability to read digital audio books – those narrated by a human being. It provides a rich set of commands to jump around within a properly marked-up digital audio book. Thus, you could skip articles in a magazine or you could go to a specific page or chapter in a book. Everything, even music, can be speeded up or slowed down, and yet there is no change in the pitch of the audio presentation (which means no more readers with high voices that sound like they have been breathing helium as in an audio cassette recorder).

It also has a sleep timer that can be set for as long as an hour, but you have to remember to turn it on. Otherwise the VR Stream will read your audio book all night long and it can be quite a job finding the place where you last remember reading.

It also has a bookmark feature, which allows you to save

bookmarks in anything you are reading or hearing. Even if you remove the SD card, the bookmarks are saved on the VR Stream, and it is a simple matter to jump to a specific bookmark.

You can download a book the moment you want it. For digital talking-books from the National Library Service in the U.S.A., you need to obtain a user ID, a password, and a user authorisation key for your VR Stream. After going into the NLS webpage, you have to direct your browser to <http://www.nlstalkingbooks.org/dbt> - from there simply select the application instructions link and follow the prompts.

If you buy audio books from audible.com, it is easy to activate the VR Stream. Simply download and install the latest version of the Audio Manager software, and you can activate the VR Stream through the menus of the programme. You will need to connect the VR Stream to your computer to do this. So far Victor Stream seems to be the only system that allows books from audible.com to be speeded up and slowed down in real time, i.e. as you are reading them.

In summary, the VR Stream can do the following:

1. You can carry and listen to lots of digital audio books in one small unit.
2. You can get digital audio books when you want them – no more waiting for books to arrive in the mail.
3. You can listen to your favourite songs anywhere you

go, and you can play them in random order if you choose.

4. You can record meetings and lectures, and have hours and hours of recording for as much time as you can get out of the battery.
5. The battery is both rechargeable and replaceable. If the battery dies, it can be replaced with a fully-charged spare, available from HumanWare for about US\$30.00.
6. You can set bookmarks that will not disappear when you remove the SD card.
7. You can speed up anything that is being played even books from audible.com.

IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

1. Currently, the entire collection of music is randomised. It would be good if the music player could restrict randomisation to individual albums.
2. The text-to-speech capability should be improved. A better speech synthesiser is needed to read text e-books.
3. It should be able to read books coded as formatted Braille (BRF) files.
4. It should be able to play WMA (Windows Media Audio) formatted files.
5. Bass and speed controls should be available for all forms of playback. Today these controls are available

only with the music player.

Despite the improvements needed, the VR Stream is a versatile and highly useful device for reading audio books and playing music.

In all recorded history there has not been one economist who has had to worry about where the next meal would come from.

Peter Drucker

PROPOSALS FROM MCR FOR THE NATIONAL BUDGET CONSULTATION 2009

By Dato' Dr Mohinder Singh
Treasurer
Malaysian Council for Rehabilitation

Editor's Note: Both MAB and NCBM are affiliate-members of the Malaysian Council for Rehabilitation (MCR). In fact, MAB was one of the founder-members when MCR was established in the early 1970s.

MCR has thus come up with some proposals for consideration by the Ministry of Finance. If the proposals are implemented by the Ministry, it would have far-reaching and positive consequences for the non-governmental organisations in particular. These proposals were presented at the meeting with the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Dato' Sharizat bt. Abdul Jalil, in September 2009.

The proposals are as follows:

Proposals for the National Budget Consultation 2009 are:

1. ESTABLISHMENT OF A GOVERNMENT WELFARE FUND TO ASSIST THE NGOs IN CAPITAL EXPENDITURE AND DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Current Situation

At present the government provides grants to the NGO's for

operational expenditure. This is a great help to the NGOs because they are able to use this money to cover at least 20 to 25 percent of their operational costs and annual activities.

However, 70 to 75 percent still needs to be raised from the general public for operations and annual activities. This leaves the NGOs with very little time and resources for long-term planning and capital expenditure. Such capital is crucial if the NGOs are to be able to expand their capacity for development by increasing their services to meet the growing needs of the disabled clients that they serve. This is in view of the increasing population and advancing technology in the country.

1.2 Proposal

To lessen the burden of NGOs, it is proposed that the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development consider establishing a welfare fund to assist the NGO's in capital expenditure. NGOs should be able to apply to this fund for capital expenditure assistance on a ringgit-for-ringgit basis.

With help from this fund, the NGOs will be encouraged to

upgrade their programmes and increase their services to meet the needs of the growing numbers of disabled persons. Thus, this will make it possible for the NGOs to implement their development plans for the benefit of the disabled they are serving.

2. SALARY GRANTS FOR APPROVED POSTS IN THE NGOs

2.1 Current Situation

Many NGOs which run approved education or vocational centres are provided with financial grants for a number of posts such as teachers, instructors, matrons, wardens, speech therapists, physiotherapists, and other clerical or professional staff. However, the grants provided are based on the old U9 scale which was last updated in 2002. As for government salaries, they have moved onto the U41 scale.

Consequently, NGOs face great difficulty in recruiting competent staff because they are unable to pay commensurate salaries as they are still based on the old salary structure. In view of the fact that the younger generation, especially the graduates, prefer to opt for jobs in the public sector with much more lucrative salaries, many of the NGOs may ultimately have to close down or the government may have to consider taking over the burden.

2.2 Proposal

Government grants, both for professional and clerical staff in the NGOs, need to be updated and based on the new government

salary scale which has been recently revised to the U41 scale in 2007.

Government grants should also be reviewed in accordance with the current cost of living. This is to enable the NGOs to meet the rising costs for electricity, telephone, transport and postage.

3. TAX EXEMPTIONS FOR DONATIONS TO CHARITY ORGANISATIONS

3.1 Current Situation

Before 2008, no limits were imposed on tax exemptions for donations from individual donors to charity organisations. With effect from 2008, however, a maximum of 7% has been placed on tax deductions for individual donors. This ruling will jeopardise the funds of many NGOs because a significant proportion of their funds come from individual salary earners.

3.2 Proposal

It is proposed that the government revert to the former policy of unlimited tax exemption for donations from individuals to charity organisations. This is to encourage members of the general public to continue their good works by resuming their generous contributions to the NGOs for the benefit and upliftment of the disabled.

CONCLUSION

We do earnestly hope that the government will give due

consideration to the three proposals that have been put forward by MCR. With their implementation, the NGOs and the disabled they serve will have a much brighter future.

The chief lesson I
have learned in a
long life is that the
only way to make a
man trustworthy is
to trust him; and the
surest way to make
him untrustworthy is
to distrust him and
show your distrust.

Henry L. Stimson

EMPLOYMENT OF DISABLED PERSONS IN ASIA: NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND ISSUES

Part I

*By Ryosuke Matsui
ILO Regional Advisor on
Vocational Rehabilitation for the Disabled*

Editor's Note: *This pamphlet on "Employment of Disabled Persons in Asia" was published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) during the Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons from 1983 to 2002. Taking a look at this analysis now may be useful in helping us to see what changes have really taken place in the current situation, particularly in Malaysia.*

I. DISABLED PERSONS AND THEIR EMPLOYMENT SITUATION

1. Size of Disabled Population

Some fifty countries of Asia, including Western Asia and the Pacific, account for a population of approximately three billion people, more than half the world's population. On the basis of the United Nations contention that at least one person in ten is disabled, Asia's disabled population may well number 300 million. And this number increases each year by some nine million.

Taking into account the number of families involved, it can be said that at least 20 to 25 percent of the total population in any country is adversely affected by the presence of disability.

In human terms, it is a depressing picture as the majority of the disabled are unable to find work; hence, they experienced feelings of inadequacy, dependence and insecurity – often opting out of society or taking up begging in the street.

There is no indication that the problem is diminishing. At the same time, the improvement and expansion of medical and social care services in Asian countries mean that many severely disabled persons can survive early childhood and would seek rehabilitation, thereby increasing the demand on existing services and facilities.

Several countries of Asia have recently undertaken statistical surveys to assess the size of the disability problem. In Japan, for example, a survey in 1987 revealed that there were some 4.2 million disabled persons, or about 3.5% of the total population.

According to a sample survey in China in 1987, the number of disabled persons was more than 51 million or 4.9% of the total population. About 7,500,000 were blind and visually impaired persons.

While the United Nations maintain that at least 10% of the population

of every country is disabled, the sample surveys in Asian countries revealed a much lower incidence. This is probably due to several factors such as the exclusion of some of the major disability groups (the mentally ill).

There appears to be an urgent need for surveys of disabled persons to be conducted on much more scientific lines and with a predetermined definition of the term "disabled person" as a firm basis for identification purposes. The lack of accurate data is a major obstacle to the sound planning and development of rehabilitation services.

2. EMPLOYMENT SITUATION OF DISABLED PERSONS

From the ILO point of view, the beneficiaries of vocational rehabilitation and employment services should be for all disabled persons, whatever the origin and nature of their disability and whatever their age, provided they can be prepared for or can retain suitable employment.

Based on experiences in some developed countries, about two-thirds of the disabled population fall into the working age bracket. Thus, with high rates

of unemployment and under-employment in most developing countries in Asia, the majority of these people are still being denied the opportunities to work.

Moreover, the employment conditions of disabled persons working in industries are also often inferior to non-disabled counterparts; many of them are paid lower wages than non-disabled counterparts who engage in similar jobs, partly due to discriminatory practices.

According to the Harris survey in the USA in 1985, two-thirds of all disabled Americans between the age of 16 and 64 are not working. But about 66% of working age disabled persons say that they would like to have a job. About 47% of working age disabled persons who are not working say that employers will not recognise their capability of doing a full-time job.

Other factors include a lack of available jobs in their line of work, under-education and a lack of marketable skills, lack of accessible or affordable transportation, and lack of adaptive equipment or devices to help them work easier or communicate with other workers.

In developed countries many of those with no income-generating activities can rely on social security or social welfare provisions; in developing countries most cases depend on begging or family care for their existence. Unfortunately, the traditional system of family care in many developing countries is being eroded by so-called progress, development and modernisation.

3. The Value of Work

Why is work an essential goal for persons with disabilities? In most societies, its importance derives from interacting economic and psycho-social pressures or needs.

Firstly, most of handicapped individuals and their families need the income that can be obtained from gainful employment. The majority of families with disabled members are like the majority of other families in that their economic resources do not permit them to survive without current income.

The second need is related to the value placed on productive and gainful employment. Nearly every statement of human objectives in nearly every culture assigns a high value to work as a part of the complete life. Thus, when an individual is disabled and is not working, he is judged to be failing to meet one of the principal standards of behaviour in his society. He is perceived as being inadequate and incomplete; the disabled person also perceives himself in the same way.

The third element is the need of disabled persons to be integrated in the normal flow of life in their society. Together, the family, the school, and the place of work constitute the arena in which social relationships are formed, social skills are developed, and social status is confirmed, increased or lost. Without the opportunity of taking part in those processes, a disabled person is severely hampered in the quest for genuine integration in society.

The fourth value of suitable employment lies in the fact that

it gives a regular structure and discipline to living. Studies disclose the depressing effect on all people of day after day passing by without the challenge of tasks to be performed. It is much worse for those who, because of a permanent disability, must look forward to months without being needed and a lifetime of boredom and loneliness. Work is not the only solution, but it is an important one.

However, many governments are still trapped in the conventional thinking that to provide welfare benefits to the "unfortunate" is proof of their will and ability to practise humanitarian ideals. But for the millions of the disabled, neither welfare nor charity is the answer since these measures tend to perpetuate rather than reduce dependency.

(To be continued)

I have failed many
times, and that's why

I am a success.

Michael Jordan

INDONESIA TRAVEL STORIES

By Tan Tok Shiong

Editor's Note: Dr Tan Tok Shiong is low-visioned and has been an economics lecturer at Universiti Malaya for about 27 years (1982 – 2009). With improved vision after a recent eye operation, he decided to pursue his favourite hobby of travelling in December 2008 just before resigning from his post as lecturer. He took off to Indonesia for a long distance walk with a friend, George Wong, who is totally blind.

He relates the stories of their adventure in the following article:

George Wong and I enjoy long distance walks. We have twice taken the eight-kilometre walk from the bottom to the top of Genting Highlands. With such experiences behind us, we decided to take the 50-kilometre walk in the volcanic island of Samosir in Indonesia.

Thus, one morning in 2008, we both met in a coffee-shop in Brickfields. From there we made our way to KL Sentral to catch the commuter train to Port Klang. In the train, we met someone who was also going to Indonesia. Thus, when we arrived at Port Klang, we walked across the road with him to the ferry terminal.

A ticket pusher immediately approached us at the ferry terminal and asked for our passports and RM99.00 fare; not

long afterwards, he sent us into the ferry. Before embarking on the ferry, however, we had gone to the foreign exchange dealer for Indonesian rupiah. The dealer, seeing that we were both blind, kindly handed to us some extra rupiah. George commented that this was the first time he had experienced such an act of benevolence in his life. Happily, on the ferry, we were treated like special guests and were taken straight to the ferry cabin without needing to join the long queue of passengers.

After five hours of smooth cruising, we reached the Indonesian port of Tanjung Balai, a sister town of Port Klang. The commerce in both Klang and Tanjung Balai was in the hands of the Hokkien, a Chinese clan, and the people on both shores were closely connected. In fact, most of the indigenous Indonesian traders in Tanjung Balai spoke some Hokkien; we even met a Malay man who spoke fluent Hokkien and sold Chinese kuih.

To go to our hotel in the town, we hired a trishaw at the ferry terminal. In fact, Tanjung Balai was full of trishaws, which was the main form of transport in the town. The trishaw was a simple wooden cart pulled by a motor-bike. We agreed on a fair which was equivalent to three Malaysian ringgit; on reaching the hotel, however, the trishaw man said that the fair was RM3 per person, which was double the original

fare. Realising that it had been a long ride, about eight kilometres, we cheerfully paid him the fare he requested.

Next morning we packed our bags for our journey to Lake Toba. The lady owner of the hotel very generously gave us a free breakfast consisting of bread, strawberry jam and sweet tea. What stunned me, however, was that she placed the food and drinks on the hotel blanket used by us in the room.

After breakfast a man outside the hotel approached us and offered to help us get a bus to Lake Toba. He stopped the trishaw and told the trishaw-man to send us to the bus terminal. He collected twenty-five thousand rupiah from us but paid only five thousand rupiah to the trishaw-man.

The bus ride took about five hours and cost us about RM10 each. At Lake Toba, we stayed in a simple hotel called Wisma Samosir. The air was cool, just like in Genting. There was no hot water supply and so we bathed in freezing cold water; notwithstanding this, both George and I enjoyed it very much. Then we were very surprised to find a massage parlour located right in front of the hotel. As we were walking out of the hotel, a man shouted from the parlour upstairs that we could get a massage for only RM30.00 and that they will be open till six in the morning.

Eating in one of the Muslim

restaurants in Lake Toba was both nice and cheap. I paid about RM2.50 for a plate of warm rice, some dried sambal, seasoned cucumber and a piece of fried fish. After the meal, we took a stroll back to the hotel. Fearing we might walk into the river nearby, the restaurant owner came after us on his motor-bike and guided us all the way to the hotel.

Next morning we packed our bags and proceeded to the bank of Lake Toba for the wooden ferry to Samosir island. To get into the ferry, we had to walk on some wooden planks and a crude wooden stairway; fortunately, the local people gave us much assistance. After one hour of cruising on the lake, we reached the volcanic island of Samosir. A man came and told us that he was the driver of the ferry; he said that as the ferry was now being serviced, he could walk with us to the resort town of Tuk Tuk on Samosir Island. It was a very pleasant walk as the man told us many stories of Samosir. He told us that the people in Samosir consumed meat from pigs, cows, buffaloes, chickens, goats, dogs and monkeys. Crops planted on the island were generally rice, corn, onion, chilly and coffee. Finally, we reached the town of Tuk Tuk after the ten-kilometre walk.

Our guide told us that he knew where the budget hotels were located and he could bring us there. He said that at night he would accompany us for a drink of tuak, a local liquor similar to toddy. As we talked, we were walking round and round Tuk Tuk town but could not find any suitable accommodation. We

became suspicious of our guide and told him to leave us alone. However, he requested for a payment of twenty thousand rupiah which he said was his commission for recommending hotels to travellers. Reluctantly, we paid him off.

After he left us we met a young local boy and he promptly showed us the way to the Anjing hotel which was only about two minutes' walk away. In the evening both me and George Wong enjoyed ourselves strolling in the almost traffic-free Tuk Tuk town, eating and drinking in the various local restaurants. We particularly loved the Islamic restaurant called Tempoh Dulu and the western restaurant called Rigi. In fact, most of the restaurants were empty due to the lack of tourists.

Next morning we left the hotel and continued our walking journey to the next town known as Simanindo, twenty kilometres from Tuk Tuk. As we were setting out, we met a lady selling souvenirs at a road-side stall. When we told her we were walking to Simanindo, she broke out in laughter and told us to stop following her.

As we walked, we felt very happy because we had the feeling of being in an island still unspoiled by mankind. The air was quiet and fresh, occasionally broken by noises from humans, dogs, goats, chickens, cows, geese and pigs.

Being unable to recognise the road, we made the best use of our white canes or walking sticks. Passing motor-bikes served as a very useful compass for us. Our noses and ears told us when we were approaching a road-side stall

with the lovely smell of food and a lot of human noise. When we dropped in at one of the stalls for coffee, the lady operator informed us that they would be serving dog-meat for lunch the next day. One of the customers picked up the dog which they would be slaughtering and he invited us to touch it. We felt very sorry for the dog but understood that it was a question of morality or survival.

As we walked on, I was suddenly gripped by anxiety as I remembered local people in Tuk Tuk mentioning that there was no hotel accommodation in Simanindo. Fortunately, just about five kilometres from Simanindo, a lady operating a road-side stall told us that the hotel Shangrila was only two kilometres away. She kindly offered to go before us by bicycle and was at the junction waiting for us. She told us that the hotel was situated deep inside the valley and we had to follow a footpath in order to get there. The footpath turned out actually to be a series of steep and dangerous mud steps; after climbing down about twenty steps, we were afraid to continue. I shouted out into the valley to see if there was anyone there who could help us. There was no reply and there was no sign of a hotel.

George Wong, who was following behind me, decided to go ahead himself to explore. After climbing down another ten steps further, he also gave up. He said that twice he nearly slipped and he could have rolled down the valley and lost his life.

So we retraced our steps and followed the road. We felt great relief when we met a local man

who told us that the hotel Se Tiak Tiak was situated near the church of the Simanindo town. At the church, a man held our hands and led us through a 200-metre muddy path to the hotel. After the muddy walk, we experienced such joy to feel the absolutely clean and perfectly smooth tiled floor of the hotel. We were elated further when the hotel owner told us that the room rent would be only fifty thousand rupiah (or about RM15.00) for the night.

The owner's wife set up a fire to cook our dinner. After one hour, the man came back with his son carrying rice, boiled vegetables, cucumber, tomatoes, fried fish and water. I felt that we were being treated like kings although we paid only RM5.00 per person for the meal.

After dinner, however, a shock awaited us when we discovered that the handle on the inside of the room door was missing. Thus, if we closed the door behind us, we would have to shout to the owner to come and open the door for us. So, before sleeping, we decided to leave the door ajar by tying it to the window-bar with a string. Now George Wong commented that this was the first time he was staying in such a "lousy" hotel.

Next morning we continued our walk to Pangururan, the capital of Samosir, which was another twenty kilometres away. We took every opportunity possible to drop in at the road-side stalls for coffee or tea; our main purpose was to have a chit-chat with the local people so we could get to know them better. In the late afternoon we felt exhausted and stopped to rest on some cement steps outside

a house. The house-owner, a 58-year old lady, also happened to be taking a rest nearby. We told her about our journey and she got her children to serve us some drinks. She told us she was suffering from arthritis and wanted to know why she had been unable to walk for the past few months. As I understood the disease, I told her that she was having systematic lupus. I explained that the disease was caused by one's own antibodies attacking the useful tissues in the body because they had mistaken them for invading bacteria and that currently there was no cure for such a condition.

Then we made our way to Pangururan. Feeling too tired to go on further, we gladly accepted a ride from someone to the hotel Dar Enang which was near a beach. At the hotel, we met a young graduate who had come to Samosir for a job interview. He told us that a fresh university graduate in Indonesia could earn about RM500 per month in the private sector while they could earn a salary of RM700 monthly if they worked with the government.

In the evening, I was chit-chatting with my partner, George Wong, when I told him that he was truly extraordinary! I said that he was doing so marvellously in the walking journey even though he was at the age of seventy-two. When I reach that age, I would like to come back to Samosir and see if I could still walk the 50-kilometre distance that we had done over the past three days.

The returning journey to Malaysia from Pangururan in Samosir was easy and smooth. The short

Indonesian tour had left us with unforgettable memories. The Indonesian people had generally been very warm towards us as the two blind Malaysian tourists. Without their kind hospitality, the adventure would not have been a success.

Indeed, we also gained much invaluable knowledge from the trip. For example, we learned from a lady coffee-shop owner in Lake Toba that the financial crisis in America could also be felt there. One of the results was the disappearance of tourists from Lake Toba. Consequently, she had been unable to use her car because there was no petrol.

In Tanjung Balai, the taxi drivers had resorted to the motor-bike trishaw for their living. Unintentionally, this proved to be an advantage because the town had a saving of 90% in terms of material costs and energy plus cleaner air into the bargain.

Finally, it may be interesting to note that we met a person of unsound mind whom the locals said was a Malaysian who had been living in Tanjung Balai for many years. When he was in Malaysia, the police had raided his area and he was unable to produce a legal document. Consequently, he was treated as an illegal immigrant and he was sent to Indonesia. This, of course, served the purpose of his family very well because they wanted him to be kept away from them in a foreign land.

A POINT TO PONDER: GOOD NEWS – SOMETHING IS FREE FOR YOU!

By Wong Kow

When something is free, it usually attracts the attention of many people. How about you – how do you react to something which is “free” for you? Well, your options may include the following:

1. Grab it immediately in order not to miss the golden opportunity.
 2. After having secured your own “free” share, you decide to quickly spread the good news to your family and friends.
 3. You may think it over carefully. You fear that it may be just a trick or a trap – or there is some hidden agenda behind the “free” offer.
 4. You may ask yourself this question first – since it is not a charitable organisation, why should it be giving something “free”?
 5. Perhaps you would start thinking whether this offer is absolutely “free” – the ultimate goal of the organisation after all is to make a profit.
 6. It may be your habit to ignore such “special free offers” altogether – it is your conception that “nothing is free” after all and so you advise everyone else not to fall into such “traps”.
- I am certainly not able to offer any clear-cut or correct choices with regards to the above-mentioned options. If, for example, you were to choose the first option and decide to “grab” the “free” offer, you may end up with the following probabilities:
- (a) You may be required to purchase something else from the same company up to a specific amount in order to secure the “free offer”. In this way, you may end up being convinced to buy something which you only realise later that you actually did not need at all.
 - (b) In the case of “buy two, get one extra free”, you will undoubtedly end up owning three of the same items. Take shoes, for instance – do you really need to have three pairs of the same pattern of shoes? Even if you did need a second or third pair of shoes, it would surely have to be something different (in order to fit the feet of your child perhaps).
 - (c) Foodstuffs as “free offers” may be nearing the end of their shelf-life or would be nearing their expiry date. It would, therefore, be wiser to pay more money for different varieties of food items rather than going for the so-called “buy two, get three free offer”.
 - (d) If someone comes knocking at your door and introduces himself or herself as the representative of a certain reputable business corporation, and should he or she inform you that you have been the lucky winner of a valuable prize, my advice to you is never to place your trust in this supposedly “good news”. If you gamble your luck in this manner and provide a positive response, you are most likely to end up in great trouble.

It seems I am being too negative, aren't I? To be honest, I have to admit that sometimes the “free offer” may really be genuine. By being sceptical and hesitant, you may end up missing out on a truly golden opportunity!

Well, the choice is yours ultimately. This is just a point for you to ponder.

MY COMPUTER - BEST COMPANION, WORST FOE

By Daud Amin

Modern living has become so dependent on computers that I have heard many professing, "I just can't live without my computer" or "The computer is my life!"

I have found myself to agree that these claims are undisputably true - indeed, the computer has made my work so much easier, faster and more efficient. We no longer need to join the long queues at the bank for banking transactions; retrieving data and information are easily available at our fingertips and in the comfort of our homes; blind people can "read" printed texts and access reference materials quite easily without needing to depend too much on sighted readers.

However, the computer also has its drawbacks. For example, computers with certain software can incriminate its users without their knowing of it initially. When they discover it later, it may be too late as it could have cost them their job, a lifetime's savings, or even caused them to spend time behind bars.

There is the software programme that can detect any downloading, including songs that an employee makes to his iPod. In fact, everything that a worker does from his desktop will be disclosed to his boss without leaving his office desk.

Another spy software is capable of searching all correspondence in order to block sensitive data or undesirable materials from going out or coming in. It could also detect the tone of emails which indicate job dissatisfaction, hatred of the company or intention to quit the company. This may result in your dismissal before you know it.

Indeed, there are many reasons why employers would want to monitor the use of computers by their employees. Of course, productivity would be one very valid reason. According to a 2005 survey carried out by the American Management Association and the EPolicy Institute, three out of four companies regularly tracked which websites were being visited by their employees. It also found that employees on average wasted at least two hours per day doing things other than work at annual cost to businesses of about US.759 billion.

Well, I will not be surprised if our employers are catching up fast in Malaysia. To my readers, therefore, I would like to advise the following:

You must know what is your employer's computer-use policy and comply with it.

Assume you are being monitored and behave accordingly.

Never bad-mouth your company on-line.

Don't use your personal Email accounts or post to a blog.

Avoid transmitting any messages that could embarrass you or others if made public.

Don't think that instant messaging is less permanent than Email.

When surfing the web, never click on something flagged NSFW (Not Safe For Work).

Indeed, the computer could be my best companion or my worst foe, depending how I look at the situation.

You can't help
someone get up a hill
without getting closer
to the top yourself.

H. Norman

Schwarzkopf

THE PARADOX OF OUR TIME.....

The paradox of our time in history is that
We have taller buildings but shorter tempers,
Wider freeways but narrower viewpoints,
We spend more but have less,
We buy more but enjoy less,
We have bigger houses, smaller families
And more conveniences but less time,
We have more degrees but less sense,
More knowledge but less judgment,
More experts and yet more problems,
More medicine but less wellness,
We drink and smoke too much but laugh too little,
We watch tv too much and read too little.

We have multiplied our possessions but reduced our values,
We talk and hate too much but love too seldom,
We know how to make a living but not a life,
We have added years to life but not life to years,
We have been to the moon and back
But have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbour,
We have conquered outer space but not inner space.

We have conquered the atom but not our prejudices,
We plan more but accomplish less,
We have learned to rush but not to wait,
Our computers hold more and more information
But we communicate less and less.

These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion,
Big men and small character,
Steep profits and shallow relationships,
These are the days of two incomes but more divorce.

Remember to say a kind word to someone who looks up to you in awe
because that little person will soon grow up and leave your side,
Give a warm hug to the one next to you
Because that is the only treasure you can give with your heart and it costs nothing,
Give time to love and give time to speak,
Give time to share the precious thoughts in your mind.

Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take
But by the moments that take our breath away.

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World Blind Union
Dato' S. Kulasegaran and Mr Ivan Ho Tuck Choy

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Inpana & Associates, Kuala Lumpur

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EARN SOME EXTRA CASH

Readers are invited to write for our publication, "THE NCBM OUTREACH". For articles published, payments are as follows:-

1. Original articles on the achievements of blind people or of an inspirational nature (about 500 words) - RM75.00
2. Articles containing ideas and suggestions for the improvement of NCBM or its member-organisations (about 500 words) - RM75.00
3. Articles on funny or unusual experiences (250 - 500 words) - RM35.00 - RM75.00
4. Interesting articles taken from magazines or documents of limited circulation - RM10.00.

(Note: Articles submitted by officials of NCBM or its member-organisations will not qualify for payment unless these submissions have nothing to do with their daily office duties.)