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EDITORIAL BOARD

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PAK LAH'S LEGACY FOR THE POOR AND DISABLED: A HOPE FOR THE FUTURE, PART II

By Ooi Hock Tiam

Editor's note: The first part of this article appeared in the April-June 2010 issue of "The NCBM Outreach". Here is the second part.

The 2009 Budget

This budget was tabled in Parliament on 29 August, 2008. Among the issues of possible interest to the disabled were the following:

1. Personal income-tax rebate:

The tax rebate of RM350 has been increased to RM400. However, this applies only to those whose income-tax level is at or falls below the RM35,000 bracket. This means that if (after all possible deductions) a person's taxable amount is RM35,000 or below, then he is entitled to the rebate of RM400.

This provision will definitely be of benefit to disabled employees at the management or professional level in the public sector.

2. Disabled Worker's Allowance (or EPC):

The ceiling level for a disabled person to be eligible for this allowance has been raised to RM1,200 per month. Prior to this, the ceiling level was only RM750 per month.

This means that any disabled worker who earns RM1,200 or less a month will be entitled to receive this incentive of RM300 per month from the local welfare department with effect from 1 January, 2008. This improved provision will certainly enable more disabled persons to benefit from this special incentive.

3. Unemployment Benefit for the Disabled:

The government will for the first time be giving this unemployment benefit of RM150 per month to the disabled. In western countries, the disabled have been benefiting from this special provision for some time now and a much bigger amount is made available to them.

In Malaysia, although the amount is rather meagre, this initial move by the government is much appreciated. It is understood that this allowance is meant to serve as an "Unemployment Benefit" or a token sum paid out in order to alleviate the plight of the unemployed disabled. Hence, the sum is lower than the EPC paid to the working disabled. Nevertheless, it is hoped that in the future, the government may consider raising the amount to a higher level.

4. Monthly Allowance for Disabled Students and Vocational Trainees:

This monthly allowance, initially given only to disabled students in government schools, has been raised from RM50 to RM150 per month. Now this provision has been extended to the trainees in all vocational institutions recognised by the welfare department. This is certainly a great sum of extra cash which can be very helpful to the trainees not only for the purchase of basic essentials but also for braille and adaptive aids such as white canes, braille and talking watches, DVD, CD and MP3 players, and even indoor game sets (which are rather expensive).

5. Housing for the Disabled:

With regards to housing in general, the government will be allocating RM50

million for the purpose of building low-cost housing units for the poor. One thousand of such houses are expected to be built by the National Housing Agency (or SPNB).

While the disabled may not benefit directly from this provision, the 20% discount given to disabled purchasers who buy houses from SPNB could be of some help. It would improve the chances of the disabled becoming owners of low-cost dwellings.

6. Housing Loans:

RM50 million has been set aside for this purpose. This will make it easier for applicants in general to obtain loans from Bank Simpanan Nasional to buy low-cost housing units.

The disabled may not benefit directly from this provision. However, with the policy of providing a 20% discount for disabled purchasers of low-cost housing units, the disabled should stand a much better chance of securing loans from the bank for this purpose.

7. Corporate Social Responsibility:

A special fund is to be set up in order to encourage private firms to shoulder their corporate social responsibilities. The government pledges to contribute to this fund on a Ringgit for Ringgit basis up to a maximum of RM100 million.

It is hoped that the private sector will respond favourably to this challenge by contributing generously towards this fund. I believe that the money from this fund can be used to bring about greater benefits for the disabled. Nevertheless, proper guidelines need to be put in place to ensure that the fund will be properly managed and bring about effective assistance to the disabled.

8. Income-tax Exemptions for Companies:

The income-tax exemption for companies which carry out corporate social responsibilities has been raised from 2% to 10% per annum. This could serve as a good incentive for the private sector to provide more assistance for the poor, the needy and the disabled.

9. Monthly Allowance for Special Teacher Assistants:

This monthly allowance of RM200 will be given to special teacher assistants. This refers to those who are actually full-time government servants who are being deployed to provide special assistance to special education teachers under the special education programmes. However, this allowance should not be confused with the RM250 monthly allowance being given to all special education teachers (as announced in the 2008 budget).

10. Monthly Allowance for House Assistants:

This allowance is for those house assistants who are taking care of the elderly women at the Rumah Tunas Harapan Bakti in Kulim, Kedah. This allowance has been increased from RM600 to RM1,000 per month and it is meant only for this particular home.

Nevertheless, this has certainly given us hope that this allowance may be extended to other house assistants serving under similar schemes throughout the country.

11. Welfare Assistance to Households:

This provision is aimed at the households among the “hardcore poor” of the country. The critical income level of such households is estimated at RM720 in Peninsular Malaysia, RM850 in Sarawak, and RM960 in Sabah. These households with a total income at these respective levels or below are now considered to be among the “hardcore poor”. These households may apply for welfare aid ranging from RM100 to RM750 per month, depending on the needs of a particular household.

In the third part of my article, I shall be looking at the comments that appeared in various newspapers concerning the budget provisions which make up the legacy of Pak Lah to the poor and the disabled.

FROM TRASH TO TREASURE

By Dabak Lynn

Editor's note: This true life story of a blind girl, Dabak Lynn, who was born in Sarawak, is taken from a book by a blind author, Lim Wah Heng. The book is entitled "God's Dream, My Destiny" which was published in 2003.

This story shows that the curse of blindness could still haunt us in our modern times. However, unlike the blind children of even just a couple of centuries ago, there is at least some hope for our blind children today.

Here is Dabak Lynn's story:

I was born in 1965 in Kapit, Sarawak, East Malaysia. Due to its primitive environment, medical facilities were not readily accessible. The only hospital that was available to the people from my village was the one in town run by missionaries. The Iban people used to depend on herbs and tree roots that they could find or, alternatively, the witch doctor for their medical treatment.

As a baby, I became very sick. My parents did not know what to do with me. They tried many things to make me well but nothing seemed to improve my health. Being superstitious, their last resort was to change my name hoping that I would recover from a suspected bad omen or charm. But the change of name did not bring about any positive results.

In the meantime, both my parents died and I was left to the care of one of my relatives. Because my health was deteriorating and nothing could save me, my relative decided to leave me on the rubbish dump hoping that I would die and no one would ever find out. That was what she did but I did not die! After a while, someone suggested to her to take me to the hospital in town.

She arrived at the hospital with the bundle in her hand and as she handed me over to the lady at the counter, she said, "If you can make her well, you can be her mother."

The lady at the counter at the Kapit Mission Hospital was the late Sister Lydia Maureen who belonged to the order of nurses from Germany. I had the privilege of meeting her during my trip to the international congress in London in 1990. She told me that when I arrived at the hospital, I only weighed 11 pounds and I was two years old then, suffering from severe malnutrition. She also told me that the doctors said that there was no hope of me surviving because I refused to eat or drink. But her stronger faith in God proved the doctors wrong because after a few weeks of eating banana and biscuits that she managed to feed me with, I began to pull through. As a result, I became strong and healthy but the only thing they could not do was to save my sight.

At the age of three, I was admitted to the Salvation Army's Kuching Children's Home in East Malaysia. There I learned all about Christianity and, at the age of ten, I made my own decision to ask God to come into my life.

My primary education was done at the School for the Blind in Kuching. As there was no secondary school for the visually impaired in Kuching, I was sent to Kuala Lumpur to further my education in a boarding school. Life began to take a different turn. My sense of security was taken away. The majority of the students spoke Malay while the only language that I was able to converse fluently in were English and Hokkien, one of the Chinese dialects I happened to know. I felt lost and lonely.

During that stage of my life and without any knowledge of my family background, I wanted so much to know who my parents were. "Oh! If only I could find out more about my family!" That was my constant longing. When I heard the other students talking about their sisters, brothers or parents, my heart hurt. The more I heard about other people's families, the more I wanted to know about my hidden background. It was a deep sense of rejection I was going through. The situation got worse and more embarrassing when I was persistently asked, "Why is it that you don't know who your parents are?" One of the teachers at the school even came to her own conclusion in front of the whole class, saying to me, "Maybe you are a child of a prostitute and, therefore, you don't know your mother. You don't have to be ashamed of that you know!"

Ashamed! I was humiliated. I was sixteen then. Because my desire to know my parents was not fulfilled, I decided to rebel against God and reject the teachings I had received. I stopped attending church and reading my Bible.

In 1983 I decided to change my faith and to change my name. But when I got to the registrar's office, they told me I had to go back to Kuching to submit my application. So after my Malaysian Certificate of Examination (MCE), I returned home grudgingly. I only went back to the Kuching Children's Home because that was the only home I knew. I was angry and hurt.

I do not know how it happened, but God worked a miracle in my life. Nothing else could explain what took place. On Easter 1984, I felt God's presence so close to me!

In spite of this experience, nonetheless, my desire to trace my family background did not diminish. I still felt sad and lonely because I wanted someone that I could call my father or mother and have a sister or brother to share my life with. The opportunity came for me to get some answers to those questions when in 1990, I was able to go to Germany to meet with Sister Lydia Maureen. What she shared with me then opened my eyes to the circumstances surrounding my birth and early childhood days.

As a result, I was able to accept what had happened to me. It has brought a certain rest and wholeness to my being. I could now look forward to the future with a greater sense of optimism.

Deep down, I always knew that God had a special plan for me when he put me on this earth. His plan for me was more evident when he called me into full-time ministry as an officer of the Salvation Army. In 1993, I became a cadet at the Salvation Army Training College in Melbourne (Australia Southern Territory).

During my training, I met a lovely man named Timothy. He was truly a gift from God. I believe that our relationship was the working out of God's marvellous plan. It was indeed a blessing beyond my wildest dreams. We have now been married for nearly eight years.

What I have missed in my life as a child, God has more than adequately met because of his infinite love. Now I have my husband's parents to call as my own. I really feel a part of a big family, and the sense of belonging is healing.

I am able to identify with blind children because of what I have gone through myself. I can feel their need, but I can also see their dreams. The greatest joy is to let them realise God's dream for their lives.

SBM PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: CHALLENGES IN CREATING AN EQUITABLE SOCIETY FOR THE BLIND, PART I

By Ivan Ho Tuck Choy

Editor's note: Ivan Ho was one of the founder-members and the second president of the Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM), which is one of the five member-organisations of NCBM. The "National Seminar to Chart a New Direction for SBM" was held from 28 - 30 March, 2010 at the hotel Seri Malaysia in Bandar Gohtong Jaya of Genting, Pahang.

Here is the paper which was presented by Ivan Ho at the Seminar:

1. Why and How SBM Was Formed:

1.1 Formation of BCC:

It was back in 1960 when an American lady, the late Dr Issabella Grant, was sent on a mission by the National Federation of the Blind of the USA (NFB) to some African and Asian countries in order to sell the idea of "Federationism" to blind people, ie the blind should have a voice in shaping their own destiny and should be a partner in contributing in-puts to the services provided by the government and the non-governmental organisations. The countries she visited included Pakistan and Malaysia.

In Pakistan, Dr Grant managed to get the late Dr Fatimah Shah (a medical doctor who recently went blind and who lost complete hope in herself) to regain her confidence and to set up the Pakistan Association of the Blind. Dr Fatimah later became the third president of the International Federation of the Blind (IFB).

However, it took more time for the idea and meaning of "Federationism" to catch on in Malaysia although her visit did generate some interest in such a movement of the blind. By coincidence, a pen-pal of the late Mary Poon and Elizabeth Hoe visited this country in 1963; she was Mrs Johnson from England. She managed to convince a group of us to form the Blind

Community Club (BCC), which was a social group to get blind people to meet regularly for singing sessions and to organise outings around Kuala Lumpur and to other parts of the country. We met quite frequently at the quarters of the late Edward Tan, a former braille instructor at the Gurney Training Centre (GTC). Although its role was limited, BCC was the forerunner of greater things to come.

1.2 Formation of IFB and SSB:

As a follow-up to the visit of Dr Grant, a blind attorney from NFB named Russell Kletoing was sent in 1963 to enlist movements of the blind for the formation of the International Federation of the Blind (IFB). The IFB was to be the answer of the blind to the international organisation of service-providers for the blind known as the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB). In fact, the blind in those days felt that they were being discriminated against and were not being treated with respect.

By this time, things had started to move quite rapidly. Members of the BCC realised that more concrete actions needed to be taken and thus the seeds for the formation of the Selangor Society of the Blind were planted. Among the active members of BCC were Lee Ah Kow (a form six student who lost his sight and was admitted to the Gurney Training Centre), Susan Yew (who was working as a stenographer at Federal House and who married Lee Ah Kow in the 1960s), Mary Poon, Elizabeth Hoe and Kathan Pillai (the last three were working in the Braille Publishing Unit of the Malayan Association for the Blind as seconded employees of the government).

Through the contacts of the three braillists, we obtained the free services of a lawyer, E. H. Mitchell, to help in drafting the Constitution of the SSB. We met with strong opposition from MAB (which later changed its name to the Malaysian Association for the Blind) – its executive director, H. L. Lee, tried every means to obstruct the formation of SSB and he solicited the support of the founder of MAB, the late Major D. R. Bridges.

In spite of their opposition, SSB was eventually registered with the Registrar of Societies and inaugurated in March, 1964. At its inauguration, which was held at the Krishnan Dial School (where the two old coffee-shops now

stand), 23 blind persons signed up as members.

Because of the close association between the three braillists and their sighted readers, some of the guests at the inauguration were very prominent people such as Lady Walker (wife of the United Kingdom ambassador). Consequently, the three braillists were subjected to very harsh treatment by MAB and they were denied access to their sighted readers, the aim being to cut off contact and support for SSB.

I vividly recall a statement made by the chairman of MAB, the late Dato' Albakri, at the inaugural dinner of SSB; he said that "Any organisation not formed under the wings of MAB would not last long". This statement haunted me for a long time and challenged me to prove his words wrong.

1.3 SSB Activities and Funding:

All meetings of the management committee and social gatherings of members were held regularly at 8C Jalan Thambipillai, Brickfields, the flat which was then occupied by Susan Yew, Anne Toh and Margaret Yeoh. Some activities were carried out on a weekly basis such as English and Mandarin classes and singing sessions. Almost all of the refreshments were contributed by the ladies occupying the flat and it was always Anne Toh who provided and served tea.

Excursions were organised to Port Dickson, Genting Sempah, and so on and garden parties were held in the houses of associate members. Some of us even had the opportunity to fly in the Piper Cub, a six-seater plane of the Flying Club at Sungai Besi. In the initial years of SSB, in fact, all resources for the organising of activities were supplied by members and associate members.

To raise funds, "Bring and Buy" sales were organised in the houses of associate members. These were actually mini-fun fairs to which we brought along donated foodstuff and articles and bought something in exchange. Members and friends contributed generously in the form of cakes, plants, paintings, etc. Of course, all the proceeds went directly into the coffers of SSB.

Another means of raising funds was through the auction sales. Items would be donated by members while others would bid to buy them at much higher prices than what they were worth. In most instances, it was for the sheer fun of outbidding each other rather than wanting the items. For instance, a piece of soap costing a few cents could fetch as much as RM30.

Back in the 1960s, in fact, there were very few opportunities for the blind to socialise or attend functions. Therefore, some of the objectives of SSB were to provide opportunities for members to get together for social activities, to help each other in times of hardship, to share information and experiences, and to speak out on matters affecting the blind.

1.4 Fighting Discrimination:

One of the first unpleasant issues that we had to deal with was the discriminatory practice pursued by MAB in disallowing the blind workers in the Kinta Valley Sheltered Workshop to buy braille watches. MAB maintained that only the blind office workers would need such expensive items. Thus, we had to intervene by buying several of the watches and bringing them personally to Ipoh by taxi.

We also spoke out on behalf of the blind workers concerning their complaints of unfavourable conditions, unpaid wages, and EPF deductions not being made on time.

1.5 Links With IFB and NFB:

SSB was one of the founding members of IFB when Lee Ah Kow, the first president of SSB, attended the IFB inaugural meeting in the mid-1960s in the United States. His expenses were paid mainly from his own pocket and supplemented by contributions from members and from the NFB. As none of us had any experience in administering an organisation, we had to rely heavily on the Braille Monitor, a publication of NFB, for knowledge, information and inspiration in the running of SSB.

Close contacts were also maintained with IFB and NFB. I was appointed to attend the first IFB convention held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1969. My expenses too were mostly met by contributions from members and from my own pocket. My subsequent trips to Germany in 1974, Riyadh in 1977,

Belgium in 1979, and Sweden and Norway in 1980 were all paid for either by IFB or by the organisations of the blind in those countries. My trip to Germany was entirely sponsored by the California branch of NFB and it was through the initiative of Dr Issabella Grant who collected contributions from its members.

1.6 Overcoming Friction and Conflict:

Due to the lack of experience in leadership, management and fund-raising, we began to stagnate and made little progress. Some members wanted to expand the organisation to include blind persons outside the state of Selangor. However, the management committee felt that it was too early in view of the lack of expertise or funds to organise activities for an expanded membership.

This eventually became a major issue and several members began to lose interest in SSB, including myself. In fact, Kathan Pillai, who was a founding member, handed in his resignation due to friction in the leadership.

For the next few years, SSB was very inactive and several members thought of leaving the organisation. However, a group of us (which included Wong Kow, Lai Kok Keong and others), decided to give SSB a last chance by bringing about change in the top leadership at the 1972 Annual General Meeting. We succeeded, but it also resulted in the resignation of Lee Ah Kow and some other members.

1.7 Planning for the Future:

We quickly got into full gear in planning for the future. Some of our plans were:

(a) To expand SSB to cover the whole of Peninsular Malaysia and to rename the organisation as the Society of the Blind in West Malaysia (SBWM).

This we managed to accomplish and soon we were recruiting new members, particularly from Penang. Among the new members were John Kim and Peter Chin who later became the third president and the editor of the newsletter respectively.

(b) To strengthen the funds of SBWM and purchase a flat to set up the office and to hold activities.

We organised a walkathon at Tasek Perdana, hikathon up Penang Hill, started the postal appeals campaign on a limited scale, held two lottery draws (the first one being graced by the then Welfare Minister, the late Tun Fatimah), and several “bring and buy” sales activities. This goal we achieved in 1975 with the purchase of the flat at 123A Jalan Sultan Abdul Samad, Brickfields at the price of RM42,000. Subsequently, we purchased another flat at 40A Jalan Padang Belia in 1980 at the price of RM100,000.

This enabled us to start selling braille equipment on a limited scale, set up the temporary employment scheme to help members waiting for job placements, establish the revolving loan scheme for members to start their own businesses, provide grants to members in Pahang for poultry rearing and growing of fruits and vegetables, publish our newsletter, set up the audio unit, increase the number of social activities, and begin to employ full-time staff.

The salary of the first executive secretary, Godfrey Ooi, for the first three years was paid for by the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind (now known as Sight-Savers International).

In the early 1980s SBWM was expanded to cover Sarawak and the name was changed to Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM). We were one of the first organisations to start a computer literacy class. A room was constructed in the hall of 40A Jalan Padang Belia. To create more space, we purchased another flat at 42A in 1990 at the price of RM138,000.

(c) To Hold Public Awareness Activities:

Exhibitions were organised at Ampang Park and Sungai Wang to let the public know what blind people can do; at the same time, members were able to sell their products such as cassette-tapes by Alfred Ho and handicrafts from St. Nicholas and MAB.

SBM also held a week-long orientation and mobility session conducted by two instructors, Liew Yoon Loy in collaboration with Jane Hider from England who was on vacation in Malaysia at the time.

Members were sent to attend seminars and to voice our displeasure over things not done for the blind. One of the workshops was organised by the Malaysian Council for Rehabilitation in 1974; we joined hands with the orthopaedically handicapped Society of Malaysia in speaking out against the exclusion of our two organisations as affiliates.

Through SBM's representatives on the MAB Council, we contributed ideas for the improvement of Taman Harapan and Gurney Training Centre. We spoke out against MAB raising money in the name of the blind for the purpose of building the eye hospital since the late Tan Sri Lee Yan Lian had already offered to dedicate a wing of the Tung Shin Hospital for the advancement of ophthalmology. Worse still, we knew that the proposed eye hospital would occupy the land given to MAB for the building of a workshop for the blind. We spoke up strongly that more services for the blind should be set up rather than embarking on projects with little benefit to the blind.

We protested when the hostel for the blind was not properly administered. Finally, SBM decided to withdraw its representation from MAB on the grounds that every move of SBM was treated with hostility. In particular, MAB refused to open up its membership to blind people and it was negative towards our proposal for the formation of the National Council for the Blind, Malaysia.

(d) To Keep SBM Relevant to Members Through Information Dissemination:

We conducted membership recruitment drives, held frequent viewpoint gatherings to exchange ideas, published the newsletter, organised excursions and held annual dinners. We had invited the late Tan Sri H. T. Ong, one of the Chief Justices on the Federal Court, to one of our dinner functions. Although he was the chairman of MAB, he had shown understanding for the formation of SBM and what it stood for. I remember that occasion very well because when I was served with a piece of roast chicken with bones, I was in a predicament whether or not to use my fingers in front of a distinguished guest. Noticing my embarrassment, he said to me, "The best way to eat a piece of chicken with bone is to pick it up with your fingers, and enjoy your dinner." That was exactly what I did.

1.8 Formation of NCBM and MCD:

I did not contest for the post of president in 1980. John Kim was elected the third president of SBM and Mohd. Amin succeeded him in later years. I remained as the fund-raising chairman and as one of the representatives looking into the formation of the National Council for the Blind, Malaysia and the Malaysian Confederation of the Disabled in the mid-1980s.

I was elected as the first vice-president of NCBM and the first president of MCD after they were formed. NCBM had its office set up in SBM for a few months before it moved to rented premises in Jalan Bangsar. When I put my full attention on NCBM as the second president after the death of the late Tun Hussein Onn in 1990, SBM was already owning three flats in Kuala Lumpur, a building in Penang, a building in Kuala Terengganu built on a piece of land donated by the state government, a piece of land in Pahang, and several thousands of Ringgit in the Sarawak branch building fund. I believe there was also more than RM1 million in the reserve fund of SBM.

It was my secret dream in the late 1980s to raise at least RM5 million to buy the building where the Railway Recreation Club (RRC) is today.

1.9 Achievements:

What we did achieve can be summed up in the following few words: We built up an organisation and endowed it with some funds and several properties. We attracted a membership of around 3,000 and successful blind persons were convinced to join, including the late senator Datuk Dr Ismail Salleh. We have helped to create an organisation that has the confidence to stand as an equal with its partners and to speak out on issues affecting the blind. That SBM is recognised as a strong affiliate in NCBM and MCD on the national level and in IFB and later WBU on the international level bears testimony to its strength and the respect it enjoys.

In short, the blind in Malaysia have a platform of their own to do what it means to be blind, to voice their concerns and to bring about positive change for the blind.

(To be continued)

COMMUNITY POLICING IN BRICKFIELDS

*By Godfrey Ooi Goat See
Deputy Executive Director
Malaysian Association for the Blind*

The Brickfields Police had a dialogue with the blind on 11 June 2010 at the MAB hall in Kompleks MAB, Kuala Lumpur. According to the deputy director-general of the Brickfields police, they will be more involved with the community in Brickfields in maintaining law and order in the area. For example, if a blind person is robbed or molested, he or she can call the police and they will come immediately and write the report on the spot. Thus, the blind person need not go to the police station to lodge the report.

If the blind victim cannot identify the robber or molester, he or she should try to get some evidence for DNA testing such as a torn cloth, some hair, or even blood on the finger-nails. On the other hand, scratch-marks on the victim and even saliva spat on his or her clothes could also be used as evidence.

To the question of obstacles on the pavement such as lamp-posts and signboards which lie in the jurisdiction of other authorities like DBKL and Tenaga Nasional, the police said that they will write to the relevant authorities to sort out the matter.

This prompted a blind resident in Shah Alam to ask what can be done in her situation. On both sides in front of her house, the drain is uncovered and poses a daily hazard to her. She is fearful that she might fall into the drain some day as she makes her way to and from work. Surprisingly, the police replied that they will write to the Shah Alam authorities to see if the matter could be dealt with.

Concerning vehicles parked in the wrong places, the police said they would make a survey of the Brickfields area. Summons will be issued and fines imposed on the culprits.

A low-vision person complained that he was often harassed by the police because they accused him of pretending to be blind. They did not believe

him even after he had shown them his OKU card. The police response was that they will introduce a training programme for their personnel concerning blindness and how to deal with blind people.

Another blind person complained that two ladies posing as a mother and daughter had been going round to the massage centres run by the blind in Brickfields. One of them would request for a massage while the other would go to the counter to remove money or other items such as handphones. The police said that they would be installing CCTV in sensitive areas so that it would be easier for them to nab the criminals.

Finally, the police disclosed the most crucial piece of information. The deputy director-general told the audience the complainant or his lawyer had the right to phone up to the police to find out about the status of the report. If no action had been taken on the report, the complainant had the right to refer to the higher authorities. However, they emphasized no one else had the right to phone on behalf of the complainant except the

For any complaints or to check on the status of a report, call 03-2274 4465.

NEWS FROM THE MALAYSIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

Best Blind Student Awards 2008:

At the beginning of 2010, MAB presented awards to the best blind students for the year

2008. They included the following:

1. Wong Shin Yee for the UPSR with five As:
She was from the Sungai Kantan Kajang Integrated Programme. She received RM200.
2. Ahmad Shahide bin Roslan for the PMR with six As and two Bs:
He was from the SMK Khas Setapak in Kuala Lumpur. He received RM300.
3. Norirfan bin Razali for the SPM with five As, four Bs and one C:
He was from the SMK La Salle Brickfields. He received RM400.
4. Noraisyatullah Radiah bt. Ali Daniah for the STPM with a CGPA of 3.25:
She was from the SMK Badin Tuaran, Sabah. She received RM500.
5. Lim Tien Hong who graduated from Universiti Malaya with a B.A. (Hons.) Degree with a CGPA of 3.48. He received RM2,000.
6. Amy Lim Mei Huey who obtained a Master's Degree in Human Resource Management which qualified her for the Dean's list of 1.57 from UTM Skudai, Johor. She received an award of RM2,500.
7. Dr Ahmad Kamal Arifin bin Mohd. Rus who obtained his PhD in History from Universiti Malaya. He received an award of RM3,000.

Photography as a Hobby for the Blind:

Do you know that even the totally blind can take up photography as a hobby? This has been proven by the blind in America with the production of a book and a film based on their photography exploits.

A volunteer, Jolynn Tan, approached MAB in 2009 with the idea of trying out something for the blind in Malaysia. She offered to train a small group of blind persons in developing this hobby. So far they have been taught some of the techniques of photography and they have gone round Brickfields, the lake gardens and other scenic spots to try out their hand at photographing objects and sceneries.

ISO Accreditation for MAB:

MAB was officially honoured with the ISO 2001/9008 certification on 28 February, 2010. The function was graced by the secretary-general from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. MAB is the first organisation serving the disabled in Malaysia to be conferred the ISO accredited status nationally and internationally.

In this connection, MAB is proud to announce that it achieved 30% employment of blind persons on its workforce of more than 100 personnel. In fact, 32 out of the 104 staff working in MAB are blind at the beginning of 2010.

Farewell to Rosnah Alimuda:

Rosnah Alimuda retired from MAB on 25 February, 2010 after serving as ABC teacher and coordinator for about ten years from 1999 to 2010. She joined MAB after retiring from government service at the age of fifty-six.

During her tenure of service, Rosnah has made significant contributions to MAB, particularly in helping to set the assistance to blind children (or ABC) programme in the right direction and in establishing the first PDK

programme for the blind in the country (PDK meaning Pemulihan Dalam Komuniti).

Rosnah will be remembered with fondness and deep appreciation, especially by the PDK children and clients.

One-Way Street in Brickfields:

On 13 April, 2010, 40 organisations headed by Rukun Tetangga of Brickfields (including MAB) made an earnest appeal to the Government not to implement the idea of the one-way street in the Brickfields area. Some reasons given for the objection was that with the implementation of the one-way street, it would result in many more speeding vehicles along the roads which would pose great danger not only to the disabled but even to schoolchildren and to senior citizens. With increased robberies and molestations by unscrupulous criminals, Brickfields will no longer be a safe place for its residents, especially the blind. Instead of facilitating the movement of traffic, there would, in fact, be greater traffic congestion because many of the motorists would resort to double parking.

The loss of peace and tranquillity in Brickfields would significantly affect the religious places of worship. The worshippers will turn to other alternatives rather than face the hustle and bustle and traffic jams on the way to Brickfields. Following the appeal, the Minister of Federal Territories, YB Senator Dato' Raja Nong Chik Dato' Raja Zainal Abidin, met with the organisations on 16 April. A vote was taken on the issue of the one-way street in Brickfields and the representatives voted 'no'.

On 19 May, the Deputy Minister of Federal Territories, YB Datuk Saravanan a/l Murugam, held a meeting with the blind at Kompleks MAB. He confirmed the news that the one-way street would not be implemented along Jalan Sultan Abdul Samad and the inner roads of Brickfields. However, the idea of the one-way street will still be implemented along the main road of Jalan Tun Sambanthan.

Axa Affin Insurance for the Blind:

This insurance scheme was launched at the MAB hall on 21 May, 2010. MAB has been appointed to be the administrator of this Personal Accident Insurance Policy for the blind. Any blind person aged between 18 and 65 years can benefit from this scheme and the policy can be renewed up to 72 years of age.

The benefits are as follows:

Death of Client:

Plan A – RM10,000

Plan B – RM20,000

Plan C – RM50,000.

Permanent Disablement:

Plan A – RM10,000

Plan B – RM20,000

Plan C – RM50,000.

Accidental Medical Expenses:

Plan A – RM500

Plan B – RM1,000

Plan C – RM2,000.

Cash Relief/Funeral Expenses:

Plan A – RM1,000

Plan B – RM2,000

Plan C – RM3,000.

Premium Payment:

Plan A – RM11

Plan B – RM24

Plan C – RM56.

Blind persons wishing to register for the insurance policy are required to submit the following:

Name of insurer

Identity card or passport number

Contact number.

M.K. Baskaran Passes Away:

M.K. Baskaran passed away on 31 May (Monday) in his own home in Shah Alam. His body was discovered by his relatives on Wednesday, 2 June. His cremation burial was attended by about 300 persons, including some representatives from the MAB Elderly Blind Club.

Baskaran was a member of the first Elderly Blind Committee which was set up in 2001. He faithfully carried out his duty at the Elderly Blind Centre, especially on Wednesdays, when the elderly blind with their friends and volunteers came together for indoor games, personal reading of their documents, walks to the park or surfing the internet.

His death is a great loss to the MAB Elderly Blind Club. May his soul rest in eternal peace.

Bidding Farewell to Margaret Eng Yeoh:

On 25 May 2010 (Tuesday), Margaret Eng Yeoh, a member of the MAB Elderly Blind Club, set off on her journey to St. Nicholas Home in Penang. She was an inmate of the home during her childhood years, then went to Kuala Lumpur for vocational training and gainful employment, and now she's back at her alma mater at age of 81 to spend her golden years with familiar friends at the Blind Senior Citizens' Home.

Margaret has been a source of encouragement and inspiration to many of her friends. She taught braille to some of the blind at St. Nicholas Home during her youthful years. Then she worked as a telephone operator among many sighted colleagues at the Government Statistics Department at Young Road

(now Jalan Cenderasari) near the Tang Ling Hospital and Lake Gardens. She received the Long Service PPN medal from the Agongin 1977. In fact, she had served as telephonist for about 30 years from 1954 to 1983.

We take this opportunity to wish Margaret God's blessings and happy retirement at St. Nicholas Home.

Visiting the Elephant Sanctuary and Ostrich Farm:

The Outreach Care group of MAB organised a visit to the Elephant Sanctuary in Pahang and the Ostrich Farm in Negeri Sembilan from 21 - 22 May, 2010. The objective of the excursion was to bring about social integration between the blind and sighted volunteers.

The first stop was at Kuala Krau in Pahang to see the seledang, a species of wild buffalo. Standing at about six feet in height and about five feet in length, this fierce creature will charge at you when disturbed. However, if you were nimble enough, you could avoid the on-coming charge because the seledang will only charge straight ahead without turning left or right. Fortunately, the seledang were quite tame that day and some of us tried to touch one of the animals; but the seledang only kept showing its backside to the visitors.

The Elephant Sanctuary is at Kuala Gandah in Pahang. These Asian elephants were smaller than their cousins in Africa. Each of the elephants can carry about 1,200 kilograms or at least three average-sized persons on its back. It needs to drink at least 3,000 litres of water in a day.

The Ostrich Farm was in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. Avoid getting kicked by an ostrich because you will feel the weight of 300 kilograms upon you and it will mean certain death as you get torn apart. Cover both the eyes of an ostrich and it will remain in a frozen state for as long as the blindfolds are covering its eyes. When racing, the ostrich can be controlled like a horse to turn left or right by covering the left eye or right eye. It can carry about 200 kilograms of weight but the farm management only allows children or small-sized persons to ride on the bird.

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE: APPLE'S COMMITMENT TO ACCESSIBILITY

*By Moses Choo Siew Chong
Assistant Director
National Council For The Blind, Malaysia*

Apple has for many years been providing innovative solutions for the ICT industry. In the last few years, Apple has even included assistive technology among its products as standard features at no additional cost. Examples include the iPhone, iPod, and screen-access technology for the blind such as the Mac OS X with screen magnification and VoiceOver.

The revolutionary iPhone now has an equally revolutionary screen reader and a number of innovative assistive features that make it easier to use for the blind.

The same VoiceOver screen reader made popular on the Mac is now a standard feature on the iPhone 3Gs. It is the world's first gesture-based screen reader, enabling you to enjoy the fun and simplicity of the iPhone even if you cannot see the screen.

What makes VoiceOver on the iPhone truly remarkable is that you can control it just by using simple gestures that let you physically interact with the items on the screen. It is easy to learn and fun to use. Instead of memorising the many keyboard commands or endlessly pressing the tiny arrow keys to find what you are looking for, you simply touch the screen to hear a description of the item under your finger, then gesture with a double-tap, drag or click to control the phone.

The speaking rate is adjustable and so you can set it to a speed that best suits your listening ability. VoiceOver uses distinctive sound effects to alert you when an application opens, when the screen is updated, when a message dialog appears, and more.

VoiceOver includes built-in voices that speak 21 languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, Cantonese, Mandarin and Hokkien.

In addition to touching and dragging around the screen, you can also flick left and right to move the VoiceOver cursor precisely to the next or previous item on the screen, no matter how big or small the item may be. By flicking, you have precise control of what you hear.

When you are typing text such as an email or message, VoiceOver echoes each character on the keyboard as you touch it; it echoes again to confirm when you enter it. You can also have VoiceOver speak each completed word either in place of each character or in addition to each character typed. A flick up or down while typing enables you to edit a word just as easily and as precisely as typing in a new word.

There is also a word prediction feature which would suggest the correct spelling when you type a word incorrectly. With Speak Auto-Text enabled, you will hear the sound effect and suggested word spoken automatically. You just keep typing to ignore it or press the space key to have iPhone type it for you.

VoiceOver also features an innovative new virtual control called a “rotor”. You turn the rotor by rotating two fingers on the screen as if you were turning an actual dial; this changes the way VoiceOver moves through a document based on any setting you choose. For example, a flick up or down might move the text word by word. If you are proof-reading, you could move VoiceOver character by character – this is perfect for editing text. You could also use the rotor to navigate web-pages. When you are on a webpage, the rotor contains the names of common items such as headers, links, images and so on.

VoiceOver works with all of the built-in applications that come with iPhone 3GS, iPod, iTunes, Safari and Maps. Thus, you can place and receive calls, surf the web, email your friends, check your stocks, find out about the weather, and very much more.

You can use your voice to play music or make a phone call. Just press and hold the home button, listen for the audio prompt, and speak the name of the artist, album or play-list you wish to hear. You can pause, play, change tracks, and even shuffle your music.

When you want to make a call, speak the name or telephone number of the person you would like to call. The iPhone 3Gs understands 21 different languages.

Zoom helps you magnify the entire screen. This is particularly useful for low-vision persons who want to see what is on the display. Zoom can work everywhere, including the Home, Unlock and Spotlight screens.

iPhone includes a few easily discernible physical buttons which can be used to control the phone. They include the sleep/wake button, ring/silent switch and volume-control buttons.

For improved email readability, you can increase the default font size of email text from medium to large, extra-large, or giant.

THE STORY OF A BLIND TELEPHONE OPERATOR

By Dr Tan Tok Shiong

Editor's note: Dr Tan Tok Shiong is a low-vision person and he was a lecturer in Economics at Universiti Malaya until his retirement in 2008. He loves to spend his time writing about the inspirational experiences or adventures of blind people. The following story is about the life of a blind telephone operator:

My name is Mohd. Ruzani bin Jusoh. I was born on 13 January, 1963 in Kampung Banggol Pauh, Bachok, Kelantan.

My father passed away when I was three years old, leaving me behind with four other brothers and three sisters. So my mother had to work hard as a rubber tapper in order to support the family.

When I was six years old, my mother sent me to live with my grandmother so that she could look after me. As for my eldest brother, he had to stop schooling after form three in order to join my mother in rubber tapping at the estate. My eldest sister also had to stop schooling after form one to help in baby-sitting my youngest sister who had just been born.

I was fortunate to be able to continue my form four and form five education in Sekolah Menengah Kubang Kerian, Kota Bharu and I was in the Science stream. In order to attend school, I had to cycle ten kilometres every morning from my grandmother's house to the main road. I would then put my bicycle somewhere and take a bus to the school. At the end of the school day, I had to take a bus back to where I had put my bicycle and then cycle ten kilometres home to my grandmother's house.

Subsequently, my eldest brother ventured into business. This enabled him to support me in going on to form six in a privately run school.

After leaving school, I helped my eldest brother in his electrical business for a short period of time. Then I started work as a quality controller in a

chip-board factory in Pahang. Unlike ordinary plywood which made use of the outer part of a tree trunk as raw material, chip-board was derived from the core of the tree so that the wood was much stronger and of much better quality.

To make a piece of chip-board, the wood had first to be ground into chips and then into very fine particles with the help of machines. The fine wood particles were then mixed with glue, ammonia and a hardening substance. The mixture was then compressed by a hot press machine, thereby turning them into very large biscuit-like pieces. These pieces were then cut into appropriate sizes and then dried in the open. Finally, chip-boards measuring 8 by 12 feet were then produced.

So what was my job? Well, it was my responsibility to test the quality of the final product – I had to test their strength and their water absorption ability, thereby ensuring that the formula of the mixture had been correct.

It was in this factory where I first met my sweetheart. She was a worker in the packaging department. However, we got married only after I had left the factory.

Thus, having gained much experience as a quality controller, I applied to the University of Malaya for the job of a laboratory assistant. I started in this new job in July 1987 and I was assigned to take care of the laboratory in the Geological Department. Indeed, I was very happy to learn that Geology was about the study of our earth which provided very useful knowledge for the exploration of minerals and petroleum.

On 16 September, I was cleaning the fume cupboard of the laboratory. Many bottles of used acetone were kept in this cupboard. Acetone is a chemical similar to alcohol and it is used as a cleaning agent. In fact, the university students would dip their instruments into the acetone in order to remove the stains.

As I was removing the bottles of used acetone, I was not aware that the students had used one of the bottles to store other chemicals. I would have been warned if the students had bothered to cancel the original label on the

bottle. And so I removed the bottles and poured out their contents into a large empty plastic container. Then, having closed up the mouth of the container with a screw-cap, I carried the container and placed it on the trolley.

As I was pushing the trolley into a store-room for safe disposal later on, the plastic container suddenly exploded. The chemical splashed everywhere in the room and on to my body. I rushed to the toilet to rinse myself with water. Unfortunately, the chemical had seriously burned my face, chest and legs. My clothes were also very badly burnt so that they just broke into pieces when I touched them.

As I looked into the mirror, I was shocked to discover that I was unable to see my own face. I suddenly realised that I must have become blind.

A short while later, I was brought by ambulance to the emergency unit of the University Hospital. Meanwhile, the fumes from the chemical had filled up the laboratory and they were seeping into my supervisor's office. There was no escape route for him and he began to faint. Fortunately, the fire squad came in time to rescue him by breaking the window.

In the evening, the head of the Geology Department, Prof. Mohd. Ali Hassan, brought my wife to see me. She was already eight months into pregnancy and was preparing to return to her kampong so that her mother could take care of her.

One of my doctors happened to be the opposition leader in parliament, Dr Wan Azizah, who was then working as an ophthalmologist in the hospital.

Vitamin E was used to help the skin on my face to recover. However, the burn marks are still obvious on my chest and legs. The doctors tried their best to save my sight and they sent me to Adelaide in Australia for an eye operation. A world renowned ophthalmologist, Prof. Douglas Coaster, transplanted into my right eye a cornea that had been donated by a Japanese. After transplanting the cornea, he tested my eyes by waving a pencil in front of me. Unfortunately, I could only see some shadows. This meant that the operation had failed even though the eye looked sparkling from outside.

Thus, the Gurney Training Centre for the Blind in Brickfields was my next destination in life. I took up training in telephony and was employed as a telephone operator at the University until now.

Being treated as a special case, I was provided with quarters on the campus. Together with my wife, we raised our two children here. My eldest daughter is now nineteen years old and she is taking up Islamic studies at the Sekolah Menengah Ugama Sultan Ahmad Shah in Pahang.

One day my wife revealed that she had felt a premonition that some misfortune might befall me one month before the unfortunate incident occurred. In fact, she reminded me about that night when she woke up weeping and I asked her why she was crying. However, she said there was no reason but actually she was afraid to answer. The truth was that she had woken from a dream in which we were both rowing in a sampan on a dark ocean. Suddenly, our sampan was attacked by a crocodile and I was taken far, far away. She was left alone on the sampan in extreme sorrow and fear.

People often ask me whether I am upset because I have become blind. Nowadays I am able to give the answer “no” because both my wife and I have accepted our fate. We have adjusted very well, knowing that Allah will give the best to his children, including myself.

I feel that I am much better off than many sighted people. I have a loving wife and we have successfully brought up a family. To my surprise, in fact, opportunities have started opening up for me to travel to far-away places such as Sumatra, Jawa, Kalimantan, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines and Saudi Arabia. And I am able to travel in spite of my blindness.

A POINT TO PONDER: DO YOU LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

By Wong Kow

Uncle Andrew and Aunt Annie's golden wedding jubilee celebration was over. As my wife and I were walking towards the nearby parking lot along with many others who had also emerged from the grand function, we suddenly saw two other couples, my nephew Johnny, his wife June and my niece Margaret and her husband Michael.

With this picture suspended in my mind – so many happy couples all walking together in the same direction – some stories began to take shape in my mind.

Johnny and June were walking hand in hand, slowly but patiently, reminding each other to watch out for puddles of water, uneven steps, small drains or any other obstacles along their way. We saw Johnny approaching the car, opening the passenger's front door, politely inviting June to take her seat before fastening the seat-belt, and then he himself finally proceeding to the driver's seat and going through the same motions for himself.

“What a loving couple!” would probably have been the words of admiration coming forth from the lips of an observer.

Margaret and Michael were also walking towards the car-park to get their car. However, they did not seem to be walking together. Margaret was trailing about 30 metres behind Michael. When Michael reached the car, he just made himself comfortable at the driver's seat and started the engine. Before Margaret could enter the car, Michael was roaring up the engine and honking rather impatiently.

The two couples mentioned above are my relatives. According to my observations, there has not been very much difference in their upbringing with regards to educational, career or financial background; perhaps the only difference I can think of is that Johnny and June are newly-weds while Margaret and Michael have been married for ten years.

Ideally, there are many ten-year periods for a married couple to venture through. We often see and admire loving couples like Johnny and June. But we also encounter couples like Margaret and Michael who have to struggle extremely hard in order to live harmoniously.

When the honeymoon is over, it gives way to a time of learning, communicating, loving, caring, sharing, and facing the facts of life. Is it possible for Margaret and Michael to continue treating each other in the same way as Johnny and June – accepting and appreciating each other when they are together?

Now let us take a look at the life of the couple, uncle Andrew and aunt Annie. How have they been able to manage all the ups and downs in their marriage for so many decades?

How have they been able to sail through good and bad times so smoothly? Indeed, they are a shining example of inspiration to younger couples in finding happiness and balance through such well managed and long-lasting matrimonial relationship.

I remember once having asked uncle Andrew and aunt Annie about the secret of their successful marriage. We can learn from the remarks they gave.

“When a long-time married life becomes dull and monotonous, a positive mind must take over to make life interesting and full of fun again.

“During the courtship days, couples would spend hours together to enjoy an afternoon tea or have an evening walk. After the marriage has settled in, couples may find it difficult even to spend about 20 minutes together simply sharing or talking things out.

“Like a long-distance travel, do not be disappointed if the journey appears to be rough and tough at times. Go through the storm carefully and patiently and treasure your partnership with appreciation and sacrifices. Then you will ultimately see the rewards of a beautiful rainbow when the sun shines again after the rain.

“Above all, do not take things for granted. Always be apologetic, caring, loving and compromising. No matter how small or simple the actions or favours may be, they make a great difference to a beautiful and harmonious life together.”

Well, my dear married friends, let us emulate the life of uncle Andrew and aunt Annie – by providing unconditional love, we will always be able to hold each others’ hands in love and friendship. Let us live happily ever after!

QUOTATIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Confucius:

It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Aristotle:

There is a foolish corner in the brain of the wisest man.

In the Abbey Press:

It isn't the mountains ahead that wear you out. It's the grain of sand in your shoe.

Benjamin Franklin:

Serving God is doing good to man. However, praying is thought to be an easier service and is therefore more generally chosen.

In Proverbs Chapter 21 Verses 19:

Better is it to dwell in a wilderness land than with a contentless wife along with vexation.

Goethe:

Tell me what you are busy about, and I will tell you what you are.

In Proverbs Chapter 16 Verses 32:

He that rules his spirit is mightier than he that rules a city.

John Powell in His Book, "The Secret of Staying in Love":

The genius of communication is the ability to be both totally honest and totally kind at the same time.

Confucius:

Seek not every quality in one individual.

Charles Buxton:

The rule in carving holds good as to criticism – never cut with a knife what you can cut with a spoon.

Socrates:

The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear.

La Rochefaucauld:

We often pardon those who bore us, but we cannot pardon those whom we bore.

Sophia Loren in “The Wit and Wisdom of Hollywood” Edited By Max Wilk:

Sex appeal is 50% what you’ve got and 50% what people think you’ve got.

Our faults irritate us most when we see them in others.

Franklin P. Jones:

Wearing shorts usually reveals nothing about a man so much as his indifference to public opinion.

Leo Tolstoy:

Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself.

Alan Patrick Herbert:

The critical period in matrimony is breakfast time.

Jules Renard:

The truly free man is he who knows how to decline a dinner invitation without giving an excuse.

Andrew Young:

Influence is like a savings account. The less you use it, the more you’ve got.

George Hegel:

Genuine tragedies in the world are not conflicts between right and wrong. They are conflicts between two rights.

Leo Aikman:

Blessed is the person who is too busy to worry in the daytime, and too sleepy to worry at night.

RITA'S SECRET OF LONGEVITY

If you want to live to a hundred, you might consider the following:

Get up at five in the morning, eat just once a day at lunchtime, keep your brain active and go to bed at 11 pm.

For Rita Levi-Montalcini, Brain Scientist and Nobel Laureate, the secret is work. She goes to her laboratory every morning to supervise an all-female team in developing her Nobel Prize-Winning research on brain cells. In the afternoon she goes across town to her foundation where she works at raising funds to help African women gain opportunities in education.

“My brain functions better today than it did when I was twenty,” says Rita. And she adds, “I’m a woman with no regrets, and I think without any grave sins on my conscience.”

(Taken from “Berita Usiamas, 1/2010 Edition)

STEPHEN HAWKING: COSMIC HERO

By Wong Chun Wai

Editor's note: Despite being severely disabled, Stephen Hawking has achieved much more than most people in life. He is indeed a source of inspiration to the non-disabled and the disabled alike, including the blind.

In a rare interview with Wong Chun Wai, chief editor of STAR Publications, in January 2010, Stephen Hawking shares that there is much more that he wants to do, especially going to space and co-writing a third book for children based on the Big Bang Theory.

This article appeared in the Sunday STAR of 28 February, 2010. Here it is:

Described as “The most brilliant living genius” in the realm of Physics, Stephen Hawking is ranked only after Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. Indeed, Stephen is more than deserving of the title of “The world’s most famous living scientist”. He has achieved so much and has chartered new frontiers in spite of his disabilities and being confined to a wheelchair.

His 1988 book, “A Brief History of Time”, topped the best selling list for 237 weeks; Reported as having sold at one copy for every 750 people on earth, the book is regarded as a layman’s guide to the origins of the universe and the theory of Black Holes and has since been considered as a modern classic. He is currently working on “What Happened to the Big Bang?”, a book which simplifies the subject matter for a young audience.

Afflicted with Neuro-Muscular Distrophy since the age of 21, Stephen is unable to use his fingers and he has long lost his ability to speak. He can only communicate by using facial gestures, including eye blinks. His computerised voice system is controlled by using a blink-activated infra-red monitor embedded in his glasses.

The interview is as follows:

Q.

You have been associated with finding answers to how the universe began. Lately the world seems to be preoccupied with how it will end. You have also mentioned that the earth will be wiped out either by a sudden nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus, or some other disaster.

A.

The universe is expanding and it will continue to expand for ever – but only very slowly at a rate of about one % in ten billion each year. Of more immediate concern is that the sun will exhaust its nuclear fuel in five billion years. It will swell up and engulf the earth. It will be time to move to another system, if we are still around.

But will the human race even survive the coming century, let alone the coming millennium? There are many dangers, but one that worries me most is global warming, as it may trigger the release of large amounts of carbon dioxide from the oceans, which would add to the warming. We might end up like Venus, with a temperature of 250 degrees Centigrade and raining sulphur acid.

Q.

You once said that mankind has no future but to go to space. There is now new discovery of water in the moon and the possibility of earth-like plants. Is time on the side of mankind?

A.

Moving the human race out into space won't happen quickly. By that, I mean it would take hundreds, or even thousands of years. We could have a base on the moon within thirty years, reach Mars in fifty years, and explore the moons of the outer planets in 200 years. By "reach", I mean with the manned flight. We have already driven rovers on Mars and landed a probe on Titan, a moon of Saturn. But if one is considering the future of the human race, we have to go there ourselves and not just send robots.

Q.

You are a man of Science. Is there room for God?

A.

The question is, is the way the universe began chosen by God for reasons we can't understand, or was it determined by a law of Science? I believe the second.

If you like, you can call the law of Science God. But it wouldn't be a personal God that you could meet and ask questions, though if there were such a God, I would like to ask however did He think of anything as complicated as M-theory in eleven dimensions.

Q.

In looking at the universe, what is the view on the issues on the earth like poverty, disease, war, hunger, etc.

A.

I'm not worried about the future of the universe. The universe will continue whatever happens. But the future of the human race, and of life on earth is much less certain. We are in danger of destroying ourselves by our greed and stupidity.

Q.

About climate change. What are your thoughts on that?

A.

Climate change is happening at an ever increasing rate. While we are hoping to stabilise it, and maybe even reverse it, by reducing our CO₂ emissions, the danger is that the climate change may pass the tipping point at which the temperature rise becomes self-sustaining.

The melting of the Arctic and Antarctic ice reduces the amount of solar energy that is reflected back into space and so increases the temperature further. The rise in sea temperature may trigger the release of large quantities of CO₂ trapped at the bottom of the ocean, which will further increase the green house effect.

Q.

Will mankind survive the next one hundred years on?

A.

I see great dangers for the human race. There has been a number of times in the past when our survival had been a question of touch and go. The Cuban missile crisis in 1963 was one of these. The frequency of such occasions is likely to increase in the future. We shall need great care and judgment to negotiate them all successfully.

But I'm an optimist. If we can avoid disaster for the next two centuries, our species should be safe as we spread into space.

Q.

You're technologically wired up to get the latest information and your "disability" has not hampered you in any way in your quest for knowledge. What is it that drives you?

A.

I don't have much that is positive to say about motor-neuron disease, but it taught me not to pity myself because others are worse off, and to get on with what I still could do.

I'm happier now than before I developed the condition. I'm lucky to be working in theoretical physics, one of the few areas in which disability is not a serious handicap.

PRINCIPAL OFFICE-BEARERS AND COUNCIL MEMBERS OF NCBM FOR 2008 - 2010

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En Mah Hassan Hj. Omar, Vice-President, NCBM
Society of the Blind in Malaysia

Mr John Wong Siong Cheng, Hon. Secretary, NCBM
Sarawak Society for the Blind

Mr Ooi Chee Khoon, Hon. Treasurer, NCBM
St. Nicholas Home

Mr Wong On Fook
Sabah Society for the Blind

Mr Anthony Sia
Sabah Society for the Blind

Mr William G Brohier
St Nicholas Home

Puan Maziah Abu Bakar
Society of the Blind in Malaysia

Dato' Dr Hsiung Kwo Yeun
Sarawak Society for the Blind

Mr George Thomas
Malaysian Association for the Blind

Prof. Dr M. Chandra Sekaran
Malaysian Association for the Blind

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Committee on Education and Welfare
Mr Godfrey Ooi

Committee on Employment and Related Support Service
Mr Stephen Hsu Wee

Committee on Library and Information Service
En Saifuddin Mohammad

Committee for the Prevention of Blindness
Prof. Dato' Dr Veera Ramani

NCBM Braille Press
Prof. Dr M. Chandra Sekaran

Committee for Sports and Recreation
Dr S. Radha Krishnan

Committee for the Advancement of Women
Puan Clarice Irine Moiji

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En Mah Hassan Hj. Omar

National Council of Welfare and Social Development Malaysia (NCWS-DM)

Ven. Archdeacon Samuel D. John

Standing Committee on Prevention and Control of Blindness

Prof. Dato' Dr Veera Ramani

World Blind Union

Dato' S. Kulasegaran and Mr Ivan Ho Tuck Choy

Auditors 2009 - 2010

Inpana & Associates, Kuala Lumpur

MEMBER-ORGANISATIONS OF NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE BLIND, MALAYSIA (NCBM)

•Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB)

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Email : mablind@po.jaring.my

•Sabah Society for the Blind (SHSB)

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Kampung Air, 88000 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

Tel : 088-218 130, 218 718

Fax : 088-260 753

Email : ssftb@tm.net.my

•Sarawak Society for the Blind (SKSB)

Ong Tiang Swee Road, P.O.Box 515

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Email : ssbkb@streamyx.com

•Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM)

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Tel : 2274 6162

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Email : admin@sbm.org.my

•St. Nicholas Home (SNH)

4, Jalan Bagan Jermal, 10990 Penang.

Tel : 04-2290 800

Fax : 04-227 8590

Email : ed@snh.org.my

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