

THE NCBM OUTREACH



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VISION AND MISSION STATEMENT OF NCBM

To ensure blind people will receive appropriate training and enjoy quality services regardless of where they live in the country.

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INTRODUCING A NEW FRIEND, MR. NG WEI LAN

By Wong Kow

I could not fully understand Ah Chuan, a homeless person whom I met about Ng Wei Lan was born in 1976 in Butterworth, Penang. He was a healthy and happy child when he followed his family to Kuala Lumpur during his early childhood. He had his primary education in a Chinese school and then entered a national secondary school to continue his studies.

After leaving secondary school, he preferred to start working rather than going on to tertiary education. He wanted to earn a living so that he could help lighten the financial burden of the family as well as learn a trade for the future.

Thus, at the youthful age of 26, Wei Lan managed to set up his own business which was involved in the sale and servicing of woodwork machines. When the business started to pick up and the workload increased, Wei Lan and his workers had to sacrifice their rest days and leisure time and work for long hours.

In his early twenties, Wei Lan had been suffering from diabetes. However, because of the tough business competition and the heavy burden of making sufficient money in order to service the bank loans, he did not take any time off to have the necessary regular medical check-ups despite the doctor's advice. Instead, he would just go to any clinic to buy some medicine over the counter.

At the same time, he did not observe the necessary diet control as a diabetic patient in spite of the advice given by the dietician. Thus, one day he discovered that his left eye had gone blind when he was only thirty-one years of age. Then, over the years, the sight on his right eye also gradually deteriorated, thereby necessitating two eye operations in 2012 to save the sight in his right eye.

He was informed by the ophthalmologist who performed the operation that he had a fifty-fifty chance of regaining his sight. Regrettably, however, the operation proved to be a total failure and Wei Lan lost all his sight.

Being overcome with disappointment, Wei Lan had to take a good rest before moving on the next part of his journey in life. Without him, the family business could not continue but he had two children to feed – an eight-year old daughter and a ten-year old son. Thus, despite all the difficulties, he had to pick up the business again with the help of his wife and his father. His wife would accompany him to meet potential clients and he would still service the machines although at a much slower pace. Business was declining, however, but the expenses were increasing due to inflation and he still had to service the bank loans.

Wei Lan is hopeful that he will be able to get someone to be a business partner. He feels that with the cooperation of a partner, he will be able to overcome the pressing problems. He, therefore, looks forward to a prospective telephone call at his handphone no. 019-2747449.

Meanwhile, Wei Lan is glad to have met up with a number of blind persons in recent months. On most of the Saturday mornings, his brother would bring him to the Agape Services for the Blind in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur to join the activities there.

Wei Lan says, "It is amazing to know that many blind people, after receiving the training in rehabilitation, are able to travel about independently, find gainful employment and set up happy families."

However, Wei Lan is unable to find the time at the moment to go for rehabilitation training. He still needs to pay full attention to his family business.

At the end of the telephone interview with Wei Lan, I was impressed by his words of concern. He strongly advised readers and friends not to take their good health for granted. He gave this message: "Whenever necessary, seek medical advice and go for regular check-ups for early detection and treatment. Life is precious!"

Wei Lan would like to thank all those who had cheered him up during the hard times. He recently got baptised and became a Christian. His new found faith in God's love and guidance will surely see him through happy times once again and will give him the strength to face the challenges ahead.

My best wishes to Wei Lan and his family.

DEVELOPMENTS IN NCBM AND WORK FOR THE BLIND 2012

*By Ivan Ho Tuck Choy,
Executive Director,*

National Council For The Blind, Malaysia

2012 was a very exciting year for NCBM as it entered its 26th year of existence and charged with the responsibility of charting a new direction for the organisation as directed by the participants who attended the NCBM Silver Jubilee Convention held from 5 – 7 December 2011.

The year also saw NCBM organising two employment-related events for participants from its member-organisations, the setting up of the Centre on Advocacy, Research and Empowerment (CARE), adoption of a new action plan, hosting of the 11th WBUAP Massage Seminar, and involvement in the UNESCAP meeting in Bangkok which culminated in the signing of the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” by the Governments in the Asia-Pacific region.

2012 was also an election year for NCBM that saw a vision-impaired woman being given the honour of holding the top position in the organisation for the first time in its 25-year history. Most important of all, the leaders of NCBM took serious stock of the prevailing situation and streamlined the operations of NCBM to maximise on its effectiveness and to reduce expenses for deployment to more productive undertakings.

Holding the presidency may seem glamorous to some people, but the position comes with heavy responsibilities and requires a person to show leadership. Undoubtedly, attention will be focussed on Jasmine Khoo to see whether she will be able to build on the successes of past years to take NCBM to a greater height. We believe she can as all who are involved in NCBM are expected to work as a team to achieve the common goal of providing quality services to the blind.

The programmes undertaken by NCBM in 2012 were as follows:

1. SETTING UP OF CARE

One of the immediate actions taken after the National Convention was the setting up of the Centre for Advocacy, Research and Empowerment in February 2012. Some of its objectives were to conduct research, raise national awareness, and assist in devising programmes that will benefit member-organisations and the blind nationwide. In carrying out its work, CARE will facilitate collaboration with user groups, government and private bodies in providing evidence to support causes, give encouragement and expert advice, and identify best practices to be replicated in the country.

Mr. Yam Tong Woo, an adult blind whose previous profession was an engineer, was recruited to kickstart the project. Since its formation, CARE has taken up several issues of concern to the blind such as the problems of blind people not permitted to use certain facilities of the banks, difficulties in identifying the new currency and environment access design.

Discussions were held with JKM for a possible survey of the deaf-blind population. It has also assisted the secretariat in researching and planning projects for access audit, job coach training and empowerment of the blind, and in drawing up the new action plan. Another important task of CARE was to scout for concerned and talented young blind people to convert “Nothing About Us Without Us” into reality.

2. THE NCBM ACTION PLAN

This plan spanning the period between 2012 – 2020, was drawn up based largely on the Declaration adopted at the NCBM Silver Jubilee Convention, decisions of Council and Exco meetings, and the recommendations of dialogues and seminars organised by NCBM. This plan, consisting of goals and targets with indicators to track its progress, is aimed at achieving measurable progress in NCBM and its member-organisations within the course of the ASEAN Decade of persons with disabilities (2011 – 2020) which was proclaimed by the governments of ASEAN in Bali in November 2011.

Ten goals have been set out in the Plan as follows:

Goal 1: To promote partnership with member-organisations;

Goal 2: To advocate for access of the blind to the physical environment, public transportation, information and communication services;

Goal 3: Ensure all blind children receive the same level of free quality education;

Goal 4: Ensure that the blind can have gainful employment;

Goal 5: To promote the leadership and empowerment of the blind based on the principles of “nothing about us without us” in “Making the Right Real” as advocated by WBU and by the Incheon Strategy adopted by the governments in the Asia-Pacific region of UNESCAP;

Goal 6: Collaborate with government agencies and civil society organisations in promoting equalisation of opportunities for persons with disabilities, including the blind;

Goal 7: Promote counseling and rehabilitation programmes to equip the blind with skills;

Goal 8: Advocate for registration of the disabled and data collection to enable policy-makers to draw up the necessary plans;

Goal 9: To support international cooperation in building a better future;

Goal 10: Public awareness to raise the profile of NCBM among the public and government agencies.

3. THE 11TH WBUAP MESSAGE SEMINAR

This series of WBUAP message seminars, under the purview of the WBUAP Message Commission, is held every two years. It brings together blind and sighted experts in the field to exchange information and to use the

latest developments on upscaling the skills of massage instructors and on improving the standard of the profession.

The 11th WBUAP Massage Seminar was held from 4 – 6 May 2012 at Hotel Istana, and it went off smoothly under the charge of Dato’ Dr. Hsiung Kwo Yeun and Mr. Moses Choo. There were only 270 participants of whom 160 were from overseas, with the largest contingent of 60 masseurs from South Korea.

Our grateful thanks go to the Ministry of Health for sending Dr. Shamsaini to head the technical committee which draw up the programme and vetted the papers for presentation, and for hosting the welcome dinner. Our thanks also go to the Department of Tourism for their assistance with immigration clearance, sponsorship of prizes and a dinner. We also extend our deep gratitude to Bonvo Travel for having done a splendid job in managing the logistics, and their willingness to partner with NCBM in organizing this memorable event.

4. THE NCBM EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT SEMINAR 2012

The two-day event with the theme, “Empowering and Facilitating the Blind in Employment” was held from 18 – 19 June at the Grand Seasons Hotel. It was attended by 100 participants for which NCBM spent over RM22,000 to bring them from across the country. One of the main objectives of the seminar was, “Building a Mutual Understanding Between Employers in the Public and Private Sectors and the Blind”.

The guest of honour was Ms. Yeoh Joo Ai, Ketua Penolong Pengarah Kanan 1, Jabatan Pembangunan OKU, Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, who also launched the Directory of Jobs Performed by the Blind authored by Mr. Wong Yoon Loong for the Committee on Employment and Economic Empowerment.

The first day was taken up by presentations on two topics – “Enhancing the Productivity of the Blind in Employment” and “Best Practices – the Malaysian Experience”. The second day started with successful blind

people giving accounts of their “Success Stories of the Self-employed – Their Struggle”.

The seminar ended with a workshop session where the participants were divided into four groups to discuss and come up with suggestions for the improvement of the employment support programmes.

Some of the recommendations are as follows:

4.1 Training programmes for the blind must meet the market requirements. In addition, the trainees should be taught the essential blindness-specific skills, communications and social skills.

4.2 The Job Placement Service should be made available in every state of the country.

4.3 Urgent steps should be taken to set up support services for the blind in those states where they are absent by initiating pilot projects.

4.4 Provide support for blind job-seekers venturing into new fields of employment.

4.5 Highlight best practices by Malaysian employees of the blind.

4.6 Inculcate self-advocacy among the blind employees with their employers in order to realize their true potential and for mutual benefit.

5. DIRECTORY OF JOBS PERFORMED BY PERSONS WITH VISION IMPAIRMENT IN MALAYSIA AND THE WBUAP REGION

Historically, persons with vision impairment experience the highest unemployment or underemployment rates of any group in their culture or society. Around the world, only about 25% of those in the working age group have any form of paid employment. These statistics are even more alarming in developing countries where unemployment reaches closer to 90%.

NCBM is of the view that while the present employment situation among the blind in Malaysia might not be very satisfactory, there are examples of outstanding successes in the different levels and types of employment, be they in formal employment, informal employment and self-employment around the country. Some of these successes have been documented in a book entitled “Siapa Bersama Mereka” published by NCBM in 2006.

Through this Directory, an attempt is being made to convince potential employers to provide more opportunities to the blind. Most importantly, it is intended to encourage and motivate the blind to strive for greater heights.

(Please contact NCBM if you wish to have a copy of the directory.)

6. THE NCBM WORKSHOP TO ENHANCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PLACEMENT AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The Workshop was held from 28 – 29 November 2012 at the Crystal Crown Hotel, and it was attended by 50 participants from NCBM, its five member-organisations, and representatives from government and private sector bodies.

One of the highlights was the launching and distribution of the forms on the NCBM Job Pioneering Scheme by Dr. Wong Huey Siew, Chairman of the NCBM Committee on Employment and Economic Empowerment.

In the press statement that was released, it stated in part that “To further encourage would-be employers to employ more BVI persons, and to motivate BVI persons to explore new fields of employment, NCBM is today launching the “On-the-job training for pioneering new employment opportunities”. Under this scheme, NCBM will partner with prospective employers who are willing to give employment opportunities to BVI persons and NCBM will pay monthly allowances of RM1,200 per applicant for a trial period of between three to six months. It is hoped that by the end of the trial period, the prospective employers will be convinced of their capabilities, and that the BVI persons will have gained sufficient experience and confidence to be fully employed.

For the first session, “My concept of a placement and employment service for the blind and how I intend to move forward”, three of the speakers were the presidents of member-organisations while two sent their representatives.

For the second session on the topic, “Our Expectations from Employees and Their Supporting Organisations”, the panel of employers comprised personnel from the government and private sectors. They emphasised the need for productivity, creativity and innovativity. Employees should have skills in communication and decision-making, have integrity and be disciplined, and be equipped with sufficient knowledge and information.

At the third session on the topic “Our Satisfaction, Frustrations and Limitations: What Are the Solutions?”, the panel of speakers comprised personnel working in member-organisations. They gave some very good and helpful suggestions in solving the problems identified, such as: formal and informal education should be given to the blind from young, exchanging of experiences among personnel of member-organisations, career counseling on job preparation, and to have a module for the training of placement officers.

Some of the recommendations are as follows:

6.1 Request the government to set up the Job Placement Unit for the OKU under the Jabatan Tenaga Kerja.

6.2 Highlight best practices in employment of the blind by appointing successful blind workers in the public and private sectors as ambassadors to promote employment of the blind.

6.3 Design a module to train Job Placement Officers and promote the exchange of experiences among personnel engaged in job placement.

6.4 Collaborate with member-organisations in setting up support services to assist blind job-seekers in securing or remaining in jobs, counseling, O. & M. training, assistive technology, and so on.

7. WORLD SIGHT DAY-CUM-INTERNATIONAL WHITE CANE DAY CELEBRATIONS

Apart from providing RM5,000 every year to each member-organisation to celebrate the two international events on the regional level, NCBM also makes available RM2,000 either to the Committee on Wellness and Prevention of Blindness or to any member-organisation which offers to host these events on the national level. The purpose is to create public awareness on avoidable and treatable blindness, and on the importance of the white cane to the blind.

The Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM) hosted the 2012 joint events at Shah Bandar, Trengganu on 20th October where around 1,000 participants took part. Free eye screening and blood pressure testing were given by the Department of Health. Several government agencies and NGOs put up booths to exhibit their work.

The highlight was a 2.2 km walk around the town accompanied by the band of the Royal Malaysian Police. Dato' Haji Mazlan bin Ngah, the State Secretary, officiated the occasion and hosted a dinner the previous evening. The Trengganu State Government donated RM50,000 to meet some of the expenses incurred.

8. THE INCHEON STRATEGY

NCBM, playing an active role on the international front, particularly in WBUAP, is contributing to the development of regional cooperation and initiatives. Thus NCBM, jointly with some civil society organisations (CSO's), met in South Korea from 5 – 6 March to prepare a consolidated statement to the draft of the Incheon Strategy for review later that month. This was followed by a gathering of 18 CSO's recognised by UNESCAP, including WBUAP, in Bangkok on 13 March to get more inputs and to fine-tune the Consolidated Statement. This was presented to the UNESCAP high-level Intergovernmental Meeting reviewing the achievements of the past two decades of the disabled in order to draft a new document, the Incheon Strategy: "Make the Right Real".

The Incheon Strategy was adopted by the governments in the Asia-Pacific Region in Incheon, South Korea on 2 November 2012 which ushered in the Third Decade of the Disabled (2013 to 2022) to achieve ten goals, with over 35 targets and 50 indicators to track its progress. The Incheon Strategy will build on the successes of the Biwako Millennium Framework for Action (1993 – 2002) and would speed up the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (UNCRPD).

There were 24 persons from Malaysia who attended the Joint World Blind Union-Asia Pacific and the International Council on Education for Persons with Visual Impairment General Assembly in Bangkok held from 10 – 18 November 2012. NCBM fully paid or subsidised 16 participants from NCBM and member-organisations, the total expenditure coming up to RM94,250.

The expenditure may seem very high but this was a great opportunity for participants from Malaysia to attend this global event which, for the first time had come to the ASEAN region. The last three assemblies were held in Melbourne, Capetown and Geneva.

While in Bangkok, the participants had the opportunity to take part in a Diversity Forum dealing with issues affecting children, women and the elderly, to attend the Quadrennial Regional General Assembly of WBUAP, the Digital Access to the Information System (DAISY) forum, and to visit the booths of many exhibitors showing the latest equipment and ICT software for the blind.

Above all, however, there was the great opportunity for our representatives to network with experts and professionals in the field of blindness from around the world. It is the hope of NCBM that with the information gathered, the experience gained, and the contacts established by our participants will be translated into better planning and management of services for the blind in the respective member-organisations.

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 :

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SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

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 note that if the article is accompanied by at least two relevant photographs and if they are accepted for publication, you will be paid an additional RM25.00 fee.

You should include your address, telephone number and bank account number so that the money can be sent to you easily.

For details of payment, please see the last page.

CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF EMPLOYMENT FOR THE BLIND AND VISION-IMPAIRED

By Wong Yoon Loong

Historically, the blind and vision-impaired experience the highest unemployment or under-employment rates of any group in their culture or society. Indeed, around the world, only about 25% of those who are in the working age have any form of paid employment. These statistics are even more profound in the developing countries where unemployment reaches closer to 90%. Being visually impaired, without access to resources, exposed to society's relentless low expectations, and routinely being excluded from participation in the economy have resulted in social and economic isolation.

The National Council for the Blind, Malaysia (NCBM) is of the view that, while the present employment situation among the blind and vision-impaired in Malaysia might not be very satisfactory, there are examples of outstanding success in different levels and types of employment. There are blind and vision-impaired persons who are or have been successful in formal employment, informal employment and self-employment around the country. Some of these success stories have been documented in a book entitled "Siapa Bersama Mereka" published by NCBM in 2006. Efforts are being made to compile a directory of jobs performed by blind and vision-impaired persons in Malaysia and other countries in the WBU Asia-Pacific region so as to convince potential employers to provide more opportunities to them. Most importantly, this directory will encourage and motivate the blind and vision-impaired to strive for greater heights.

It will not be possible to list down all the jobs performed by the blind but this directory will serve as a guide. Ultimately, the choice for any type of job will depend on the interest and abilities of the blind and vision-impaired and on whatever opportunities are available.

Out of a population of more than 28 million, as at September 2011, only 331,661 disabled persons have been registered with the Social Welfare Department as compared to the World Health Organisation's estimate of 2.8

million or 10% of the whole population. The blind only make up 8.8% of the total registered persons with disabilities.

When a blind person is ready for employment, he can take the following steps:

1. Seek the assistance of Placement Units operated by organisations for the blind. At present there are less than five Placement Officers in Malaysia. However, they seem to be the most effective in getting suitable jobs for the blind as they are specialized in this field. They are responsible for matching a particular job with the most suitable applicants, bringing them for job interviews, promoting modifications to the workplace or equipment, training in orientation and mobility and in following up. Their strategies in looking for suitable employment include:
 - (a) Persuasion through telephone conversation and visiting the workplace;
 - (b) Looking for job vacancies in the local newspapers;
 - (c) Networking with the Public Services Department and Employers' Federation through regular dialogues and meetings;
 - (d) Role modeling of successful blind workers, thereby making it possible for the younger blind to replace them upon retirement or to secure new posts in the same or associated companies;
2. Register with the Labour Department which has recently started to assist disabled persons in finding suitable employment in the private sector through job-matching by the State Labour Officers.
3. Take one's own initiative to seek employment in the professional field.

EMPLOYMENT

As at June 2011, 1,600 disabled persons are employed in the Public Sector; out of which only 173 are blind. As there are no readily available data, it is estimated about 1,500 blind persons are either working in the private sector or in self-employment.

Teaching and assistant administrative officers are some of the most popular jobs in the public sector while telephony is the most popular job in the private sector. Massage seems to be the most common occupation for those who are in self-employment.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE EMPLOYMENT FOR THE BLIND

The government is playing an active role in promoting employment for the disabled through policies and tax incentives. Among the initiatives are:

- (a) A circular (Pekeliling Perkhidmatan 16 2010), issued on 15 December 2010, outlined concrete steps in realising the Government's policy to allocate at least 1% of all jobs in the Public Sector for the disabled. In this policy, the Heads of Departments are encouraged to give opportunities to suitably qualified disabled persons when filling up vacancies in their respective departments.
- (b) Under the "Skim Bantuan Galakan Pekerjaan Orang Kurang Upaya" introduced by the Labour Department in 2007, the Government will provide a grant of up to RM100,000 to entrepreneurs with disabilities who want to expand their business and give opportunities to other disabled persons. For the period from 2007 to 2011, 142 blind persons (out of the total number of 634 disabled entrepreneurs) received the grant. For the same period, a total sum of RM19,229,858 was disbursed among the disabled; employment involving the blind included massage, reflexology, manufacturing, food, sewing and various services.
- (c) In 1990, the Government encouraged the Private Sector to allocate at least 1% of jobs for the disabled. In November 2001, the Human

Resource Ministry initiated the Code of Practice for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities in the private sector. This Code of Practice outlined all the necessary steps for the disabled seeking employment and for employers wishing to employ the disabled in realising this objective.

(d) Companies are given double tax deduction for salaries paid to their employees with disabilities.

(e) Companies are also granted double tax deduction for the cost of training disabled persons.

(f) All expenses to purchase or modify equipment required by disabled employees are exempted from tax.

NGO INITIATIVES IN PROMOTING FOR THE BLIND AND VISION-IMPAIRED

In complementing the efforts taken by the Government to promote employment for the blind, NCBM together with its five member-organisations are also playing their part with generous financial support from the donors. Some of the initiatives include:

(a) Providing rehabilitation and vocational training for the blind;

(b) Providing support services to blind students who are preparing for employment or are already in employment;

(c) Establishment of the Malaysian Braille Press by NCBM in 1998 to facilitate the production of Braille materials required by blind employees such as telephone directories, training manuals and reference notes.

(d) Operating the Placement Service to assist job-seekers with vision impairment; NCBM assisted the Sabah Society for the Blind during the period from 2000 to 2012 and the Sarawak Society for the Blind from 2008 to 2011 by providing financial assistance of RM40,000 annually for the setting up and running of the Job Placement Unit in their organisations.

CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF EMPLOYMENT FOR THE BLIND AND VISION-IMPAIRED

Most blind persons want to work in order to earn a stable income so that they can be self-reliant and can live an independent life. Unfortunately, they face numerous obstacles and challenges. Some of the major challenges are as follows:

1. The blind suffer from poor self-confidence and self-esteem which are important in determining their success in education, employment and their daily lives.
2. Lack of career guidance and information on career prospects to assist them in career preparation when they are in school.
3. Limited skills development and vocational training programmes for them to venture into new fields. Most of the blind select a particular job based on what their friends are doing and not according to their own interest and abilities.
4. Inadequate adapted equipment, especially in the field of information communication technology to assist the blind in enhancing their performance. Most of such equipment are not adapted for local use and they are costly or unaffordable.
5. Most of the special schools, vocational training centres and organisations for and of the blind are concentrated in the big cities. This has led to the tendency of the blind to migrate to the urban areas so that more job opportunities have to be created here. The blind are not keen to take up job offers in the smaller towns.
6. Insufficient manpower and the lack of well equipped Job Placement Centres to tackle the issues pertaining to employment for the blind.
7. Lack of awareness and information among the employers on the tax incentives offered by the Government for employing disabled persons and ignorance of the abilities and capabilities of the disabled.

8. Infrastructural inaccessibility in the built environment and transportation hinders the independent mobility of the blind, thus limiting their ability to move freely.
9. Limited accessibility to information in alternative formats such as Braille, audio and audio-descriptive forms of presentation.
10. There is no national database containing all the information on the disabled, their training needs and job requirements. Moreover, there is the lack of effective coordination of the efforts by the Government, the private sector and the NGO's in tackling the issues related to persons with disabilities.
11. Lack of enforcement on existing Government policies and by-laws which promote the equalisation of opportunities for the disabled.

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE EMPLOYMENT FOR THE BLIND

The realisation of the need for full participation of the disabled in society requires the concerted efforts and commitment of all sectors, including the disabled themselves. No organisation or individual can solve this problem single-handedly. Some of the strategies proposed are as follows:

1. Draw up a transition plan for school-leavers before they go into employment. The plan should incorporate issues such as self-confidence, self-esteem, daily living skills, personal grooming, etc.
2. Career counselling should be provided to the students at the earliest possible time when they are still in school to allow them sufficient time to make the necessary plans for their future. Suitably qualified teachers are needed to give accurate and up-to-date information.
3. To work together with the Jabatan Pembangunan Kemahiran (JPK) in providing more adapted vocational courses based on skills competencies rather than academic achievement. Certification for these courses should be issued by JPK which will be recognised by the Public and Private Sectors. For instances, the massage and reflexology courses have received such certification.

4. Carry out research and development to localise the adapted equipment and intensify training in ICT in line with the Government's policies and initiatives in promoting the K-Economy.
5. To overcome the problem of the blind concentrating in the big cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru, the organisations providing services for them are encouraged to decentralise. More integrated programmes should be opened up in the smaller towns so that the blind can remain with their families.
6. Setting up of effective, efficient and well equipped Job Placement Units should be set up not only in the organisations serving the disabled but also in the Labour Departments at the state level. The posts of vocational counsellors and placement officers specialising in the blindness field should be created.
7. More effective implementation of the barrier-free environment and accessible transportation with the installation of Tactile Ground Surface Indicators and voice announcements to ease the mobility of the blind.
8. Make available accessible information in alternative formats to enable the blind to receive information at the same time as their sighted peers.
9. Providing vocational training opportunities and suitable employment commensurate with one's qualifications and abilities should not be taken lightly; however, instead of reinventing the wheel, we can achieve better results through regional cooperation by collaborating and sharing ideas, expertise, resources and experiences (even failures). There is a good platform to do this which is the World Blind Union Asia-Pacific Region.

Note: For the list of jobs performed by the blind and vision-impaired, please refer to the Directory of Jobs Performed by Persons with Visual Impairment in Malaysia and the World Blind Union Asia-Pacific Region compiled by Wong Yoon Loong (M.Ed.). The document is available at NCBM tel. 03-22724959.

PROPOSAL TO SET UP THE BRAILLE COUNCIL OF MALAYSIA

By Ivan Ho Tuck Choy

Executive Director

National Council for the Blind, Malaysia

Editor's Note: The following proposal was prepared on 20 January 2013 in consultancy with Mr Wong Yoon Loong, Manager of the CARE programme and Dr Kway Eng Hock, Chairman of the NCBM Committee

Braille, during its 200-year-old history, has proven to be one of the most effective means for blind people to access education, gain employment, participate in social and religious activities, and generally to obtain accurate information to live as useful citizens. Research has confirmed that blind students and blind adults who have mastered the Braille system generally perform better and are much more well-informed than those who do not know Braille (Ryles 1996, 2000; Schroeder 1989). In the event of becoming deaf, Braille may be the only effective means of communication between the deaf-blind persons and the rest of the community.

The National Council for the Blind, Malaysia (NCBM), a national coordinating body for the five major organisations serving blind people in the country, is proposing the setting up of the Braille Council of Malaysia (BCM). However, if the name limits its jurisdiction, we shall change it to Braille Authority of Malaysia (BAM) with the following justifications, objectives and functions:

1. JUSTIFICATIONS

1.1 There is no clear ownership of the Malay Braille Code. The Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education was tasked to formulate the code in 1963 which was only officially used in 1980. St. Nicholas Home Penang with the help of a volunteer software developer from England, Mr. Nicholas Drayton developed a Malay Braille Translation Software in 1994. Subsequently, NCBM worked together with Duxbury Systems USA to include Malay Braille in its Braille Translation software.

Realising the problems and limitations of the Code in computerisation,

NCBM requested permission from the Special Education Division to revise the Code in 1998. Tuan Haji Othman bin Isa was appointed to chair the Committee comprising representatives from the Special Education Division, Examination Council, member-organisations of NCBM, and teachers of the blind. Even though the revision was completed in 2004, the Revised Malay Braille Code was only officially used in the education for the blind in 2006.

Based on the chronology of events, it is the understanding that the ownership of the Malay Braille Code should logically be with the Ministry of Education.

1.2 Since there is no clear ownership, there is no official archive of all records related to the development of the Malay Braille Code.

1.3 In case of any discrepancies, disputes or irregularities in the proper use of the Code, there is no official channel to give an authoritative solution which should be accepted by all parties.

1.4 The proper use of the Code cannot be enforced as there is no official body to regulate it. In the Malaysia Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 Clause 30 (3) the Government and the private sector shall accept and facilitate the use of Malaysia Sign Language, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official transactions.



No standardised Braille Competency Certification.

2. OBJECTIVES/FUNCTIONS

2.1 As the authoritative body on Braille, BCM is responsible for promoting the proper use of Braille at all levels of activities as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Persons with Disabilities Act of Malaysia.

2.2 Standardise Braille usage, control the quality of Braille production for official use and to review the Malay Braille Code, if necessary.

2.3 Conduct competency tests and issue certificates of proficiency.

2.4 Advise on the use of other Braille codes in collaboration with the World Braille Council of the World Blind Union.

2.5 Conduct/undertake activities relating to Braille matters assigned to BCM by MOE, NCBM and stakeholders.

3. ACTIVITIES

3.1 Conduct Braille literacy workshops and seminars.

3.2 Organise Braille Reading and Writing competitions for blind students and other Braille users.


3.3 Explore ways to make the learning of Braille less complicated, more interesting and accessible through various means, including promoting the use of refreshable Braille displays.

3.4 Present awards to individuals or institutions for championing Braille literacy.


4. COMPOSITION AND OPERATIONS

4.1 Headed by a Chair from the Special Education Division, Ministry of Education to be appointed through the National Council for PWD's.

4.2 A Deputy Chair chosen by the other stakeholders.

4.3  Representatives will be from BP Khas, universities, IPG's, BBT, Examination Syndicate, etc. Representation will be through their respective bodies.

4.4 The Chair or three committee members jointly may call for meetings. There should be a minimum of two meetings within the year.

4.5  The Committee will be tasked to draw up its Terms of Reference and operational rules.

THE NCBM EDUCATION SUPPORT PROGRAMME

By Ivan Ho Tuck Choy

Executive Director

National Council for the Blind, Malaysia

Editor's Note: The following document was revised in October 2011 and is based on the 2002 School Adoption Programme drafted by Mr. Godfrey Ooi Goat See, Deputy Executive Director of MAB; Mr. Wong Yoon Loong, Principal of the Gurney Training Centre; and Mr. Ivan Ho Tuck Choy Executive Director of NCBM. The original document took into consideration the recommendations of the representatives from MAB, SBM, SMPK Setapak, SPK Batu and NCBM at a meeting held on 6 January 2001.

Here is the revised document:

1. Introduction

The NCBM Education Support Programme (NESP) is aimed at helping blind and vision-impaired (BVI) students to get access to more blindness-specific skills and useful information so that they may gain confidence in facing the realities of life when they leave school. In order for the BVIs to be useful members of society and be respected, they need to be more prepared and better equipped than their sighted peers in meeting the challenges of everyday life and at their work places. As an organisation dedicated to helping the BVIs, it is the duty and responsibility of NCBM to do more in building a better world for the blind community.

2. Objectives

2.1 Complement the efforts of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in preparing BVI students to face the challenges of a competitive environment.

2.2 Supplement the educational and training needs of the BVI students, and where possible, to help them to acquire special equipment, technical

support, and blindness-specific skills necessary for them to lead independent and useful lives.

2.3 Collaborate with concerned parties, both government and non-government bodies, in organising activities that can promote and contribute to healthy living and the acquisition of essential and compensatory skills.

2.4 Promote closer working relationship between MOE and NCBM, including its Member Organisations, in achieving the objectives of this Programme.

3. *Suggested Activities*

All activities will be carried out in collaboration with, or with the knowledge of Member Organisations, and with the permission of the respective education authorities.



3.1 Blindness-specific skills, such as daily living skills, orientation and mobility, etc

3.2. Compensatory and Technical Skills, such as Braille, ICT Literacy, Support on Assistive Devices, etc. Where appropriate, these activities to include teachers and parents of BVI students.

3.3. Support Service through enrichment programmes, such as Study Visits, Leadership Training, Motivational Talks, etc.

3.4. Recreational and Cultural Activities, such as Sports, In-door Games, Music, Quizzes, Contests, etc.

4. *Pool of Helpers*

To assemble a pool of helpers (to be trained or recruited  from retired personnel of Government or Member Organisation  assist in carrying out the above mentioned activities across the country when required to do so.

NEWS FROM THE MALAYSIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

Chong Ah Foong Retires From MAB

At the farewell party for Chong Ah Foong on 30th August 2013, the citation was read out as follows:

“En. Chong Ah Foong has served the Malaysian Association for the Blind for a period of 29 years from May 1984 to August 2013. When Chong joined the service as accounts clerk in May 1984, MAB was embarking on the Eye Hospital Project. Thus, Chong was dumped in right at the deep end to help in managing the Project accounts until the building was completed in 1986, thereby culminating in the establishment of the Tun Hussein Onn National Eye Hospital (THONEH). The success of the Project saw Chong being promoted to be Finance Assistant in October 1987.

“Indeed, during his long tenure of service, Chong had been playing the unenviable but crucial role, and very often almost single-handedly, in managing and maintaining the accounts not only for the daily business of MAB but also for various major events of The Association. Some of the memorable Programmes include the Fund-raising banquet for the new hostel to house the GTC trainees, the ICEVI International Conference of 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, and the Low vision International Conference of 2011 in Malaysia. In recognition of his contributions, Chong was promoted to the position of Accounts Officer in July 1996.

“Colleagues find Chong to be easy-going, a pleasant conversationalist and ever ready to lend a helping hand. Some, in fact, refer to him as “the nice guy”.

“Chong only had the minimal qualifications but his industriousness and willingness to learn enabled him to exceed the expectations of the Organisation that he served.

“And so we take this opportunity to wish Chong all the best in any new endeavours or undertakings and a pleasant life of joy and plenty in retirement.

“With God’s blessings.

BLIND STUDENTS BEGIN HIGHER EDUCATION

*By Moses Choo Siew Cheong,
Assistant Executive Director,
National Council for the Blind, Malaysia*

While blindness is a physical impediment, it is not a barrier to embarking on tertiary studies as exemplified by four visually impaired youths who are determined not to let the disability get in the way of their aspirations.

Blaise Yong Jih Sie, 20, from Keningau in Sabah, Krishnann Vijay Kumaran, 18, from Batu Caves in Selangor, Lee Yong Pin, 23, from Penang, and Toh Chin Yuan, 18, from Muar in Johor are all prepared to commence the Diploma in Business I.T. Course on August 5, 2013 at DISTED College. This will give them the opportunity to progress to the 3 plus 0 UK Staffordshire University for the Bachelor of Science (Hons.) Business Information Systems Management Programme.

Prior to enrolling in the College, they were at St. Nicholas Home, Penang to complete a short Computer Skills Certification Programme from ICDL (International Computer Driving Licence) US.

DISTED senior lecturer in Computer Science and I.T., Jayaeswari Sangaralingam, remarked, “Educating the blind will help us to better appreciate the beauty and challenges of life.” She added, “It presents an opportunity for us to help people with visual impairment to develop their knowledge and skills to a higher level, thereby making a difference in their lives and becoming a part of the talent pool in the community that is needed for nation building.”

She further explained that it would open up a new avenue for the College staff to contribute to people development besides augmenting their personal and professional growth through experiences in teaching and dealing with blind students.

“A group of our sighted students have volunteered to provide Buddy Support for their blind college mates to help them adapt to the campus environment,” Jayaeswari added.

As to the rationale of enrolling in the Diploma Course, Blaise Yong said, “Nowadays doing business is no longer restricted within a country or region because I.T. has been globalised. Internet business is just a mouse click away. The online business environment fascinates me and has greatly stimulated my interest in computer technology.”

He scored 3 A’s in the SPM examination and realises that assistive technology is a key factor in helping the vision-impaired to cope with the challenges of further studies.

He added, “I came to St. Nicholas Home to take up the ICDL US Course and now I’m able to use the Computer independently for various tasks such as processing documents, surfing the internet and dealing with emails.”

Blindness did not deter Yong from getting involved in extramural activities when he was studying at the Sekolah Menengah Pendidikan Khas Setapak in Kuala Lumpur. In fact, he was the Computer Club vice president, the Scout secretary and a member of the goalball team. He also attended an outdoor adventure Course at the Outward Bound Sabah.

Born totally Blind, Krishnann intends to carve out a niche in I.T. so that he will be able to help the vision-impaired community and contribute to the society at large. “I’m very keen in computing and have learnt a lot about it from friends. While in secondary school, I joined the ICT Club and I taught other blind students computer skills,” he said.

Toh Chin Yuan, who has low vision and who scored 3 A’s in the SPM, said, “My dream is to be a successful programmer, particularly in the management of information systems. I have a strong affinity for computers and I love to navigate new software.”

Toh was also a Scout secretary and he took part in the Johor state-level Ten-pin Bowling while studying at the Sekolah Tinggi Muar in Johor.

Lee Yong Ping, an ex-student of SMJK Heng Ee and who scored 3 A's in the SPM, went blind two and a half years ago. He said, "Studying at the college is certainly challenging but I'm happy and determined to make the best use of the opportunity given me. I hope to be an I.T. Trainer and programmer and contribute my bit to society and the blind community."



Associate Professor Dr Lee Lay Wah from Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Educational Studies explains to DISTED staff the approaches and techniques for teaching the blind at tertiary level as the college prepares to welcome its first cohort of 4 visually impaired students.



DISTED staff obtain insights into connecting with the blind from St Nicholas Home Penang early intervention programme and low vision centre coordinator Jayah Doraisamy (standing) during the Awareness on Blindness training held at the college.

Note:

DISTED College,
Yeap Chor Ee Campus,
340 Macalister Road,
10350 Penang, Malaysia.

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE: THE TREATY OF MARRAKESH EXPLAINED

*By Moses Choo Siew Cheong,
Assistant Executive Director,
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Editor's note: The Marrakesh Treaty is aimed at facilitating access to published works by visually impaired persons and persons with print disabilities. This explanation covers the meaning and use of the main Treaty contents. In fact, it is deliberately a layman's explanation of the treaty rather than an in-depth legal analysis. The Treaty looks complex to non-experts but WBU is, by and large, quite happy with what it allows us to do.

What is the goal of The Treaty of Marrakesh (the formal name)?

The goal of the Treaty is to help end the book famine being faced by the blind, vision-impaired and the print disabled. Currently, only about 1 to 7 % of the world's published books ever make it into the accessible formats. This is partly due to access barriers in copyright law – something the Treaty helps to remove. It does this in two main ways:

Firstly, by requiring countries which ratify the Treaty to have an exemption to domestic copyright law for visually impaired and print-disabled people. This means that countries which ratify the Treaty must ensure that their laws allow blind people and their organisations to make books accessible without needing to ask permission first from the copyright holder such as the author or publisher.

Secondly, by allowing for the import and export of accessible versions of books and other copyrighted works without copyright holder permission. This will help to avoid the duplication of transcription efforts in different countries; it will also allow those with larger collections of accessible books to share them with blind people in countries with fewer resources.

Only the so-called “authorised entities” such as the blind people’s organisations will be permitted to send accessible books under the Treaty’s terms. However, the Treaty allows accessible books to be imported or received either by other “authorised entities” or directly by visually impaired or print-disabled individuals.

Here is an outline of what the most relevant articles in the Treaty mean:

Article 2(a) Works covered refers to the type of publications which can be transcribed or distributed under the terms of the Treaty. They include “Literary and Artistic Works ... in the form of texts, notations and/or related illustrations, whether published or otherwise made publicly available in any media”.

The definition, therefore, covers books, periodicals and other similar textual works as well as sheet music. However, it does not cover films. The Treaty does not allow for the contents of a Work to be changed, e.g. to “easy read” style. The Treaty only allows for the Work’s contents to be transcribed into an accessible format.

Article 2(b) defines the term “Accessible format copy” so that this broad definition does not limit the format or the technique used to make a book accessible. It allows whichever format that will provide access to the Work “as feasibly and comfortably as for a person without visual impairment or print disability”.

Article 2(c) defines the term, “Authorised Entity”.

The role of the Authorised Entity is critical in the Treaty and it is a straightforward definition. It is a non-profit or Government agency that makes accessible copies of works. It limits the distribution of those copies to people with bona-fide disabilities, which it calls “Beneficiary Persons”. It also covers those for-profit entities that provide services to Beneficiary Persons using Public Funds on a non-profit basis.

There is no specific process or approval mechanism to qualify an “Authorised Entity”. Meeting the “broad” criteria in Article 2(c) is sufficient.

Article 3 defines Beneficiary Persons.

The definition is broad and includes just about any disability that interferes with the effective reading of printed material. It includes the totally blind, visually impaired persons, the reading disabled such as the dyslexics, and even those with a physical disability that gets in the way of effectively holding a book, turning a page or focussing on the page.

Article 4 requires countries which ratify the Treaty to enact a domestic copyright exemption. This will allow the Authorised Entities to make accessible copies of Works without having to ask permission from the copyright-holders. This is satisfied by having a law like the “Chafee Amendment” in the U.S., or one of the exemptions to copyright law for print-disabled people in the EU Member-States enacted under the terms of the EU Copyright Directive.

In Articles 5 and 6, the Treaty permits the cross-border exchange of accessible format books, both between Authorised Entities and directly from one Authorised Entity to individuals in other countries.

Article 7 touches on the Technological Protection Measures (TPM).

These refer to the sort of “Digital Padlocks” that publishers (and sometimes even blind people’s organisations themselves) put on a digital book to prevent it from being passed on or accessed illegally. Unfortunately, this padlock can also inadvertently block legitimate access to Print-disabled people, e.g. those using Screen-Reading Text-To-Speech software).

Thus, Article 7 says it should be legal to circumvent (or break) the TPM’s so that a person with a print disability can have access to the books.

Article 8 requires privacy to be respected when using the Treaty.

Other noteworthy provisions in the Treaty include the following:

Article 2 touches on the Respect for copyright holders' interests. It makes clear that accessible books sent under its provisions should be solely for the use of "Beneficiary Persons". It also exhorts "Authorised Entities" to take "Due Care" when handling their books, and that they discourage the reproduction and distribution of unauthorised copies. These are reasonable requirements.

Another provision has to do with the commercial availability of accessible format books. In fact, one of our big concerns when going into the Treaty negotiations was that the Treaty might require that you could only send or receive books in accessible formats where they were not deemed to be already available commercially in that format. Meeting such an obligation would have been impossible in practice and would have rendered the Treaty very difficult or impossible to use. However, this concept has survived in the Treaty in a much weaker form; it allows countries to choose to have a commerciality requirement in their national copyright law, which some countries like Singapore and Australia already have in existence.

Such countries would have to let WIPO know formally that their domestic law requires the commerciality test, and whether they intend it to affect the import of accessible materials into that country from elsewhere. However, there is no "commercial availability" requirement for the exporters of accessible books.

The Three-Step Test

This is a concept well known to International Copyright Law Experts, but to few others. It caused much concern among the Advocates concerned that this might be the Trojan Horse for more extensive commercial availability requirements. It appears all over the Treaty but we do not think it is likely to get in the way of helping blind people except in certain rare situations.

The Treaty Across the World

With a concerted effort for widespread ratification and implementation, the Treaty will have a huge impact on accessibility for people with print disabilities. It should both promote the domestic production of accessible materials in each country as well as provide access to books produced elsewhere. This will be important for books in languages like English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, Bangla or Bengali, Indonesian, Swahili and so on. It will be especially important for countries that have not traditionally had robust services for people with disabilities; these less wealthy countries should be able to benefit greatly from access to the extensive collections that have been developed in the wealthier and larger countries.

Conclusion

In plain language, this is a Treaty that should start to remedy the book famine. It provides a crucial legal framework for the adoption of national copyright exemptions in countries that lack them. It creates an international import/export regime for the exchange of accessible books across borders. It is necessary for ending the book famine, but it is not sufficient.

Countries need to sign, ratify and implement its provisions. Non-profit Organisations, libraries, educational institutions and Government Agencies need to take advantage of these provisions to actually deliver the accessible books that people with disabilities need for education, employment and full social inclusion.

The World Blind Union will work with colleagues and supporters all over the world to implement the Treaty and bring to an end the Book Famine for people with print disabilities.

INDOOR GAMES AT ST. NICHOLAS SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND, PENANG

By Nicholas Lam Yew Khay

Every evening at 5.30 p.m., everyone had to be out of the cottages and be in the garden until dinner-time. It was free time for the children and they could do anything they liked. Some would be walking up and down the drive hand in hand while others would be just sitting around and chit-chatting.

During the week-ends, the boys would be allowed to take out the tricycles and bicycles from the store-room and ride along the drive. Most of them were totally blind but it was really surprising how they could ride the cycles with no problem at all – rarely did we hear of any of the blind cyclists being involved in accidents or getting injured.

As for me, what I enjoyed doing most was to play on the climbing frame and monkey bars. We boys swung so much on the bars until our muscles ached and our hands were covered with blisters.

There was a room in the main house which we used to call the common room. We would be there every Saturday evening from 7.30 to 9 p.m. playing indoor games.

In the common room there was a cupboard which was full of toys and game sets. In the beginning, I loved to play with the Mechano sets. Gradually, however, the other children managed to persuade me to join them in their card games. The first card game I played was Happy Family; it was a game for four people and both the boys and girls enjoyed it very much.

Then there were the Playing Cards with which we could play a number of games. I learned how to play Beggar My Neighbour, Fishing and the Three-Card Game. This was very good experience for me as it enabled me to learn other card games when I went to the Gurney Training Centre in Kuala Lumpur for vocational training. Here I picked up new card games like Tan Chap and Black Jack. I tried to learn Jim Rummy as well but eventually gave up because they were playing for money.

Very much later, I learned how to play Draughts. A newly blinded boy from a lorry accident, Chow Hock Seng, came to the school at age fifteen. He was very good at the game of draughts and he won most of the time.

Then, in 1962 or 1963, the principal, Mr. William G. Brohier, introduced a new game known as the Beetle Drive. It became a craze for us and we dropped everything else in favour of this game every Saturday evening. There were several Beetle sets for four persons to a game.

One would get a friend as a partner and we would be sitting at diagonal positions with our opponents. For example, I would be sitting facing c while my partner b would be opposite d. Then there was this Beetle broken up into different parts – the body, the head, six legs, two eyes and two antennae. There would be a dice in a container, each number on the dice representing a part of the Beetle. Each player would take turns shaking and throwing the dice and calling out the number. The aim was to have the whole beetle assembled and whoever finished putting the beetle together first would have to shout out, “Beetle!”

To enable the team to start assembling the Beetle, one had to start with the body which was number one. Once you have got the body, any other number will do – 2 for the head, 3 for the eyes, 4 for the antennae, 5 for the probosis, and 6 for the legs. There were the housemothers and some staff on hand to help look out for cheating.

With at least eight sets of Beetles going and all the teams beginning at the same time, the noise of dices rattling, and the players shouting out the numbers, can you imagine what a racket we made! But it was an easy, enjoyable and fun game to play for pastime.

Lotto was another game in which a large group of people could participate. Numbers were brailled on cardboards and the players used plasticine to mark the numbers. In fact, this was actually another version of Bingo. The caller would pick out a number from a container in which there were numbers ranging from 1 to 99. He would then shout out the number.

For the first game, for example, the caller may say, “only the first row”. If a participant had the number being called out in the first row of his card, he would have to stick a small piece of plasticine below the number. The first player to cover all the numbers in the first row would have to shout out, “Lotto!” He would be the winner of the game and perhaps a prize.

I remember, however, that many of the blind did not like to use plasticine because it was dirty and smelly. This set me thinking as to whether there could be another means of playing Lotto. I noticed that there were plenty of scraps in the basketry section. If the wasted canes could be cut into small pieces, they could be used to stick onto a piece of plywood. I glued three rows of numbers onto a piece of plywood, showed it to a carpenter friend and gave him my ideas. I suggested that he could drill holes below the numbers.

The carpenter made a sample and we had further discussions on alterations to be made. Another sample was made which I showed to some blind friends and this met with their approval with minor improvisations. I then went ahead and got a number of Lotto sets produced for the Old Nicolites’ Association and even for the Society of the Blind in Malaysia. They became very popular with the blind and the game is still played today.

In the early 1980’s, someone brought a set of Pit, a card game, to the St. Nicholas Annual Reunion held in the month of December. This game would be played by eight persons who would be buying and selling in a commodity market. There would be eight commodities and the aim was for a player to collect a complete set of one of the commodities. The moment a player had completed the whole set of one commodity, he would have to shout “Game”. He gains the number of points on the card.

To make the game more interesting, a bull and bear could be introduced. The person holding eight cards plus the bull will game and double his points. The person holding the bear when the “Game” is called will lose fifty points. Just imagine eight people shouting all at the same time when the market opens – like a real fish market, don’t you think?

Indeed, one set of the Pit Game is rather expensive to buy. Moreover, the

wear and tear on the cards is rather high because of the constant handling. However, in order to enable more blind people to play, I did my own improvisation by buying the playing cards for the sighted and I had the words on the cards put into Braille. Wow! The game became very popular during the Reunion!

We were also introduced to Chess and I did learn how to play the game. Nevertheless, I did not go beyond the beginner's stage. In fact, I taught a few of the blind to play and they eventually became better Chess players than myself. Likewise with Scrabble – I could play the game but I was not very good at it.

Sad to say, nowadays the government residential schools and integrated programmes for the blind do not organise such programmes for the blind students. Apart from their regular academic subjects, the teachers and home staff today do not encourage the blind to acquire skills or develop hobbies by playing games, appreciating music, doing leisure reading with novels and magazines, or taking an interest in nature's plants and animals around us.

Indeed, I was very fortunate to have been a blind student at St. Nicholas. We had so much to learn through fun and leisure activities besides our academic studies. Through nature study, I developed an interest in gardening and had so much pleasure and fun in growing plants. I believe this has enabled me to understand and appreciate the Environmental Concerns for conservation and saving the planet today.

A POINT TO PONDER: THE GOLDEN AGE

By Wong Kow

Before the 1990's, most employees worked till the age of fifty-five and then had to retire. Thus, when my 55th birthday finally came, I gave a deep sigh and said to myself, "What a relief!" I thought it would be the beginning of my well deserved retirement after more than thirty years of working life. The first few weeks were truly relaxing. My wife and children had to leave home early to work and I would usually sleep into the late hours of the morning. Then I would walk to the nearby coffee-shop for brunch. Sometimes I would ring up some old friends and colleagues to catch up on the latest happenings. Occasionally, I would pay a visit to my former office and join my former colleagues for lunch or tea.

After the first month in retirement, I began to feel that the "honey-moon period" was over. I could not keep on telephoning friends or former colleagues to enjoy my relaxing hours at the expense of their precious time. In fact, I soon realised that they appeared to be rather busy. So what could I do?

I came across some report which indicated that a good percentage of retirees would withdraw their EPF and finish their life-long savings in three years. "This is indeed alarming!" I exclaimed to myself. I had to do something to prevent myself from falling into this category of people living below the poverty line.

Although teaching had been my teenage ambition, I had not succeeded in getting training as a qualified teacher. After retirement, however, the passion for teaching still lay deep in my heart. Thus, with the extra effort that I was able to muster, I started giving tuition to some students in the neighbourhood, helping them mainly with English and Mathematics. Later, a few adults who were mainly housewives, also came to me to gain improvement in their conversational English and Mandarin.

Thus, with ten to twenty hours of work every week, I was able to earn some extra money to help cover the family expenses.

I would spend some of the week-end hours at the Society of the Blind or the Malaysian Association for the Blind socialising with other blind people. I would help some of the blind, especially the GTC trainees, in learning Mandarin Braille or picking up some basic English.

As the years went by, my children were able to secure more steady jobs and they were able to take over all the family expenses. And so without many financial commitments for me and my wife, Mary, she decided to resign from her full-time job so that we could spend more time together. Besides travelling to Penang to meet up with my parents, brothers and sisters, we also went to Johore and Singapore to visit some old friends and relatives.

I used to hear a lot of stories about China from my parents. They came from the province of Guangdong in China in 1934 when this country was known as Malaya. As my father had been communicating with his brothers all these years, this enabled me to establish telephone conversations with my uncles and cousin brothers over there. Soon I was very keen to meet up with them one day in order to have a clearer insight concerning our big family circle.

In August 2001, my wife and I made the first move. We travelled to Hong Kong and met up with one of our cousin brothers, Ah Ming, who was our guide for the rest of our journey in China.

We visited two other cousin brothers and their families in Hong Kong before proceeding to Shenzhen the next day. From Shenzhen, a four and a half hour journey took us to Jexi, which was the nearest town, about twenty kilometres from the village where my father was born and had lived for twenty-seven years until he came to Malaya in 1934.

Upon arrival at the Jexi Bus Terminal, another cousin brother, Ah Ching, was waiting for us. Together with some youngsters, we spent the next three days looking at the beautiful scenery and visiting the nearby villages, towns, schools and churches. On the third day, we went to the hillside, about thirty kilometres from the village, to pay our respects to the graves and tombs of our grandparents. We said some prayers for their souls to rest in peace and for us to have a safe journey home.

With fond memories, we brought back voice recordings and a huge volume of photographs for the benefit of our parents and other family members in Malaysia. My father, who was then aged 95, treasured those priceless items most. He went through the photographs hundreds of times, closely scrutinising the faces of his brothers and sisters-in-law whom he had not met for more than 60 years.

Indeed, our visit to the village of China was most amazing. Almost all the relatives and friends there were keen to see us. They were greatly impressed that I could speak the Chinese Hakka Hopo dialect. They were puzzled and asked how I came to be born in Malaysia and yet I could still speak the same dialect of the China family. My aunt even remarked that I spoke very much like one of her sons.

Truly, life was “free and easy”! I often travelled with my wife to Taipei Taiwan where we stayed for one or two months each year. Sometimes I would join my close friends like Liong Teck Yau and Sek Yee Seong for excursion visits to other parts of China.

Time really flies! Before I could seriously ask myself, “How young am I?”, I was in year 2010, thirteen years into retirement and I was already 68 years of age. While I was considering how to spend my remaining years more meaningfully, I chanced upon Encik Taslim and Mr. Yam Tong Woo at the MAB Elderly Blind Club. They told me about the computer, a marvellous piece of modern technology to help the blind to read, to study as well as to communicate with anybody anywhere more effectively and more efficiently.

Thanks to Taslim, Yam and the MAB Cyber Club, I was able to set up my own computer with JAWS speaking software and I learnt from them how to use the email, the internet, the newsreading service, and many other computer operations. This enabled me to exchange email letters with long-lost friends and relatives within Malaysia and overseas.

I was further excited when I met Wong Kwee Heong and she helped install some software in my computer. This enabled me to read Mandarin as well. Thus, I could now read the news, emails and other documents in Chinese. I was still on “one-way traffic”, however, as I had not found someone who could teach me how to write in Chinese with the computer.

Another piece of good news was on my way, nonetheless, when my wife and I went to Taipei Taiwan in 2011 to celebrate Chinese New Year with some family members. In Taiwan, I approached the Taipei Digital Talking-book Association (TDTB) and they helped to install the software and gave me some lessons in writing Chinese with the computer. And so with the necessary knowledge in using the computer for both the English and Chinese languages, I was now able to communicate with more people as well as enjoy much more reading and writing in both languages with the computer.

Indeed, we can spend our Golden Age happily and usefully. It is great fun enjoying our hobbies. Learning a skill, picking up a new language and understanding the new technology make life so interesting and enriching!

At age seventy, if one were to learn something which would take two years to accomplish, then one could say, "I would be 72 then!" Yes, one wouldn't be very young then, but if one decided not to learn anything at all, one would still be 72 in two years' time!

In summary, it may be very comfortable just sitting in front of the TV or radio watching shows or listening to music and songs, or just spending time reading books. However, one should be reminded that as one grows older, it is important to pursue some out-of-door activities and to be closer to nature to enjoy the fresh air and sunshine.

At the same time, we must not neglect our medical care, physical exercise and maintaining of healthy eating habits. Socialising with loved ones and friends can add colour to one's life. We must live a happy and healthy life, irrespective of one's age.

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