

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.

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 and vision-impaired.

It cost The National Council for the Blind, Malaysia RM 30,000.00 a year to produce both print and Braille.

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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** NCBM has not appointed any agent to collect cash on our behalf.*

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Inungkiran Mongijal

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. NCBM Job Pioneering Scheme:

This scheme was launched in 2012 whereby NCBM will collaborate with prospective employers in providing employment opportunities for the blind. The blind person will work for a period of three to six months and be paid a monthly allowance of RM1,200 by NCBM. At the end of the period, it is hoped that the employer will be convinced of the blind person's capabilities and give him permanent employment.

For the application form, please contact the NCBM secretariat at 603 2272 4959.

2. Equipment Loan Fund For The Blind:

NCBM would like to see significant improvement in job opportunities for the blind in Malaysia. Therefore, blind persons in employment who face the difficulty in obtaining adaptive equipment can get in touch with NCBM for such assistance.

NCBM is collaborating with the Standard Chartered Bank, the Royal Society for the Blind of South Australia, and the WBU Asia-Pacific in establishing the Adaptive Equipment Loan Fund.

For more details, please call the NCBM secretariat at 603 2272 4959.

3. Research Grant On Employment And Blindness Prevention:

Application can be made for a Research Grant ranging from RM3,000 to RM5,000 to carry out research in the fields of Employment for the Blind and Blindness Prevention. RM10,000 has been allocated under the NCBM Committee on Employment and Empowerment.

Those interested, please contact NCBM at 603 -2272 4959.



SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Readers are reminded that their contributions of articles, suggestions and jokes are most welcome for inclusion in “NCBM Outreach”.

Please note that it would be helpful to the editor if such contributions could be submitted on a thumb drive or similar mode or in Braille. If the article is in Braille, it should be on single-sided pages in order to facilitate editing.

You should include your full name (as in the Identity Card) with your address, telephone number and bank account number so that the money could be sent to you easily.

For details concerning payments, please see the last page.

WHAT A SURPRISING INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY!

By Eddy Chong Ted Hin



I remember the time in 2008 when I was feeling very lonely, depressed and at the end of all hope. The Dengue Fever which I had contracted in 1997 had left me visually impaired and partially deaf. My wife and daughter had deserted me and I felt bereft of all support in my life. Indeed, my life was directionless and I did not know what to do.

Fortunately, it was at this time when I got involved in the Outreach Care Programme of the Malaysian Association for the Blind, Through this programme, I came into contact with Patricia Lee Foong Yee, a blind dialysis patient. I discovered that she was in a much worse position than me with her endless visits to the kidney centre for dialysis, i.e. undergoing the process of extracting the urea and other impurities from the blood with the help of a machine after which the blood then flows back into the body. She was suffering from renal kidney failure which had caused her to become totally blind, partially deaf and partially crippled.

I extended to her a hand of friendship and I encouraged her to realise that she could still live a meaningful life. I suggested taking her out for an evening stroll but she said she could not walk; I said I could push her in a wheelchair and she reluctantly agreed; in fact, she had not been out of doors for some years and she found the little outing to be so fun and exciting.

However, our relationship did not go on very smoothly as Patricia often had her tantrums; even with her mother who had dedicated all her time and energy in taking care of Patricia, there were frequent misunderstandings and verbal fights. I felt life to be very stressful and I was quickly getting demotivated.

Then one day I got the good news from Godfrey Ooi (who was in charge of the MAB Outreach Care Programme) that I could attend the launching ceremony for the Mount Kinabalu project by the Rotary Club, “The Climb Beyond Disabilities.” Among the 21 disabled persons taking part were three blind persons who had been selected and they were Godfrey Ooi, Taslim Kosni and Jacqueline Emmanuel.

I, therefore, thought that there would be no point in me going for the launch. Fortunately, Godfrey managed to persuade me by saying that if I was at the function, there would be a strong likelihood that they might consider slotting me in for just one more place.

Indeed, that was what happened and I got the chance to scale the heights of Mount Kinabalu in 2011. It was a very tough and challenging struggle but at last we managed to reach the peak of Kinabalu at 4095 metres or more than 13,000 feet. With this achievement, I began to reflect back on my relationship with Patricia. I became aware that our struggle was like overcoming the great mountain of Kinabalu and I realised that we could get over it if we made it one step at a time.

I began to thank and praise God for having sent Patricia into my life. Now I could appreciate and understand the true value of what I had been going through over the past years – we were actually two lonely people in the world and Patricia had reached out to give me support just as much as I had reached out to her in order to provide her with assistance.

As we struggled up and down the stairs in various buildings or over the rough and jagged pavement along the streets and pathways with Patricia in her wheelchair, it seemed to me like we were going up step by step towards our goal. I learned to understand Patricia better and indeed there were so many pleasant surprises along the way both for me and for Patricia.

I became more compassionate and loving towards other people who were struggling like Patricia and I was able to use the model that I had developed with Patricia in order to help and motivate these people.

Thus, together with Patricia and Godfrey, I formed the Blind Empowerment Society in order to render assistance and support to other needy blind persons, particularly the blind dialysis patients, the deaf-blind as well as blind senior citizens. We organised various functions and events, including the Charity Classical Music Concert, the Outdoor Education Trip to Bukit Merah near Taiping in Perak, and the Tribute to Sam Hooi Charity Night to raise funds for the purchase of a dialysis machine.

Then, one day, the “Kinabalu Bug” got me and I felt the great urge to do some mountain climbing. I decided to hike up Bukit Gasing in Petaling Jaya and a kind friend known as Brother Eric agreed to hike up with me. On our arrival at the bottom of Bukit Gasing, we met a group of young adult climbers and they volunteered to climb up the hill with us. We started walking up the hill at 4 p.m. and eventually I managed to come back down to the bottom of the hill at around 8 p.m. Sadly, however, we discovered that the young climbers had already left because, as we learned later, they had actually hit bottom at about 6 p.m., which was, of course, two hours earlier than we did; so they could not wait for us and they went their own way.

Nevertheless, I considered myself to be very fortunate because they agreed to climb up with us again for the second time. But then it happened once more – we got down the hill much later than the other climbers and so they went off without us. Later, they were very nice about it and tried to explain that it was not because of me but rather that they had other programmes to attend to; in view of this, they would not be able to join us in future hikes up the hill.

Of course, I was very disappointed although I tried to understand their predicament; and so I had to look for other volunteers to take part in our programme. As I pondered, I began to realise that mountaineering was not really a very suitable sport for someone like me and so I decided to lay off for a while.

A few months later, I joined my mother and siblings on a trip to Shanghai, China. Indeed, there were so many places to visit during our short stay in Shanghai – we found walking from place to place to be very strenuous while getting around by taxi was rather expensive. Then somebody hit upon the idea of riding around on bicycle.

I said jokingly, “but how can I ride by myself? I’m blind!”

Someone else said that there would be no problem at all because I could ride on a tandem.

“A tandem!” I thought to myself. I had never heard of a tandem before until my younger brother, Eric, showed me the two-seater bicycle. To my great surprise, I found that not only bicycles but also tandems were available in every street of Shanghai. Thus, we hired two tandem-bikes and we were able to travel around easily and much more quickly all over Shanghai.

On returning to Malaysia, I immediately went in search of a tandem-bicycle. I asked Godfrey and he told me that MAB used to buy some tandems from Shah Alam. And so I went scouting for at least eight months before I discovered a bicycle shop in Sri Petaling, which was not too far from my home in Puchong, Selangor. Thus, that was how I got my first tandem.

However, I could not ride for at least one year as I could not find a navigator to help me. And so I had to carry my tandem up and down the staircase of my second-floor flat; I put the tandem on display by spinning on its wheels at the ground floor. I was trying to attract visitors with the hope of finding a volunteer to be my navigator. Unfortunately, no visitors came.

One day, however, I met another friend, Michael Ong, at a prayer meeting of the Agape Services for the Blind in Brickfields. I spoke to him about my search for a navigator and he kindly agreed to volunteer. Unfortunately, this lasted for a short while only as Michael met with an accident. He fell from his mountain bike, hurting his jaw so that he was unable to open his mouth. He was hospitalised for a few months and I prayed for his recovery. As for me, I was again laid off for another year.

Thus, it was quite some time later in 2014 when I met Jeffrey Ng. We started riding among the housing areas in Taman Kinrara where I lived. Having got the hang of it, we then found a few more friends to join us cycling on the bicycle and motor-cycle lanes along the Kesas Motor Highway. We cycled almost every week on Saturday or Sunday for an average of 30 to 40 kilometres per trip.

Then we enrolled for the Ghombau Century Ride 2015 before the Chinese new year. We rode from Seremban over the Rembau valley and hills to Kuala Lipis and back to Seremban; we had travelled over a total distance of 160 kilometres.

In April 2015, two blind persons joined our group – they were Steven Looi and a blind lady, Siow Ling. Together we were very serious in planning for some cycling excursions. They included the Klang Premium Ride of 128 km in May 2015, the K.L.-Asia Ride of 48 km in June 2015, and the All-round Penang Ride of 82 km in August 2015.

In fact, MAB had got wind of my tandem-riding activities and they invited me to join their tandem committee in 2014 just before Christmas. I remember very well the third meeting which I had attended as it happened to be just one day before our Dear friend, Patricia Lee, passed away on April 17 2015. The itinerary for the tandem ride from Kuala Lumpur to Pahang planned for August-September 2015 in conjunction with the Merdeka celebrations was being brought up for discussion.

One of the committee members noted that it would be rather tedious to have too many stops eating and drinking and that it would be a real waste of time. I certainly agreed and I advised that there should not be too many frequent stops. I emphasised that we should only stop for rest and drink and that this should be for only about ten to fifteen minutes after which we should proceed with the journey. I added that, in fact, we should come early and that we should have a light morning meal.

Furthermore, I suggested that one day before, we could have a heavy meal for breakfast and lunch with some meat for protein followed by a light dinner and a good rest by sleeping early – probably by 9 p.m. or so. Then we should

get up early by 4 or 5 a.m. and have that light breakfast consisting of perhaps two bananas and a hot chocolate drink or Milo or Bon Coffee. After that, one should refrain from drinking too much in order to avoid toilet problems. Having to rush to the toilet now and then would be very disruptive and would put pressure on the other riders.

Of course, we could stop for rest and lunch but the meal should be light – perhaps with an energy bar and some bananas. The dinner could be more substantial with carbohydrates like spaghetti or pizza rather than curry food which are acidic.

Then I had to excuse myself from the meeting as I had another appointment but I was hopeful the voices of those who had spoken would be heeded. Next day I was stricken by the news that our beloved Patricia Lee had passed away.

As I look back, however, I am now quite amazed at how things had worked out in our lives by God's arrangement. Truly, both of us were perfect strangers, two lonely people in the world in need of the hand of friendship. Thus, Patricia had reached out to me and I to her, each of us bringing joy and consolation to another lonely soul.

In my mind, I went back to the moment when I had reached the peak of Mount Kinabalu and then tears of joy and appreciation came streaming down my face. My whole body was overcome with exhaustion as I felt the wind blowing so thin and so cold! Suddenly, I felt such an indescribable feeling of happiness as I began to realise that I had, in fact, taken part in an incredible journey of inspiration, love and fellowship. Indeed, I never thought I would have the opportunity to be involved in such a challenging struggle and I never knew that I would be able to make it to the pinnacle of success!

As I reflected, it helped me to understand that the trials and tribulations that I had faced in trying to help Patricia, i.e. the criticism, the moments of frustration and hot tempers, and the difficulties in gaining moral and financial support for Patricia, were like the great steps on the mountain path that had to be overcome. We may fall along the way but we had to pick ourselves up again and continue the journey right to the end, knowing that what we are doing is the right way forward.

Indeed, Patricia had been stuck in the house for more than ten years because nobody had the time to bring her out in order to experience the world outside. She wanted to feel the joy of being able to order her favourite meals and drinks like teh tarik and nasi paprik. She had never been to the malls and complexes and savoured the experience of going to such places as Berjaya Time Square, the Mid-Valley Mall, the IOI, One Utama, the Curve, KLCC and many more. She enjoyed very much the freedom of being able to travel by train, bus or taxi to so many places like Seremban, Ipoh, Port Klang, Rawang, Bukit Jalil, Sunway Lagoon, Farm in the City (Serdang), Palace of the Golden Horses and the Mines, and even the KLIA Airport. Indeed, she had never dreamed of being able to go to the Genting Highlands, Pulau Ketam, Melaka or Penang.

She felt such a great sense of achievement when she was entrusted with some of the responsibilities in organising a number of outdoor education trips for the blind. These included the excursion to Betong in Thailand in 2011 and the excursion to Bukit Merah near Taiping (Perak) in 2012.

One day, a friend invited her to attend an Amway convention and she was so impressed with his success. Her friend used to sell ‘chap fan’ (mixed economy rice) and life was very tough for him – he had to get up very early every morning, he had to face the uncertainty of customers coming and going, and the ever increasing rent caused him much anxiety. Fortunately, he joined Amway which brought him not only success but also the freedom to live his own life and to be free from the control of other people.

And so Patricia asked me to help her become a member of Amway and she found the meetings and conventions to be very inspiring. She worked hard and she was at least a 12-percenter many times over. She said that if she were successful, she would buy a house for her mother.

Then it was early this year in 2015 when we noticed that Patricia’s body was going black, which was an indication of the body drying up and dying. She was growing weaker and weaker as the days passed by and two of her toes had dropped off. Then she told me that for four years she had been dreaming of riding on a Harley Davidson motor-bike and that her dream would not be fulfilled if she died without riding on such a bike.

She had seen the Harley Davidson on movies and she had fallen in love with the bike from a young age. One day when she saw the bike parked outside Heart Rock Cafe in Kuala Lumpur, she dared not approach the owner because she was so young at the time. She had been telling her friends of her dream during the last four years but nobody responded.

Then when we were in Penang early this year, we met the president of the Harley Davidson Club, Mr. Khoo, who introduced us to the Events Manager, Mr Ganesan. We told them of the urgency in fulfilling Patricia's dream as she may not be able to make it over the next six months. We explained that she had survived for 22 years as a dialysis patient – usually, such patients could survive for about 8 to 10 years but Patricia had managed to survive for more than double the time expected.

They were very sympathetic and got the Harley Davidson Rider Club in Petaling Jaya to organise the event within two weeks on April 4, 2015 (Saturday).

Then came the final moment on April 17. Her last wish for a cremation and a Christian service was fulfilled. Together with her cousins, I helped to put her ashes to rest in the sea of Pulau Ketam, the place where she had gained so much joy and experience with her blind friends some years ago.

My Dear Patricia, I feel that you are continually here with us in spirit. I believe that miracles do happen and that God can raise the dead to life again. Therefore, God willing, we will meet again some day in the future.

I pray for God's blessings upon our Beloved Patricia.

THE VISION NETWORK – A PROJECT OF NCBM

Do you know of any Blind or Vision-Impaired Person who is not within easy reach of any of our organisations serving the blind?

Or are you yourself someone who is in need of blindness services and you are not within reach of any of our organisations?

Here is some good news – in an effort to reach out to these people, NCBM has set up a project so that more blind and vision-impaired persons will be able to benefit from the programmes and services provided.

The NCBM Vision Network has been set up in response to the call of participants in various seminars and workshops organised by NCBM, in particular the NCBM Silver Jubilee Convention of December 2011.

Through the NCBM Vision Network, we would like to achieve the following objectives:

1. To complement the efforts of the Ministry of Education in preparing blind and vision-impaired students to acquire the necessary blindness-specific skills to face the challenges during their education and upon leaving school.
2. To work with the relevant Government agencies and the private sector in promoting employment opportunities, and in providing support services for the sustainability of the BVI's in employment.
3. Counsel and assist newly blinded individuals and their families to adjust to the new situation.
4. To assist elderly BVI individuals to lead reasonably happy and dignified lives in their chosen environment.
5. To assist and mobilise assistance for BVI individuals with additional disabilities to cope with their struggles.

The Vision Network Team

The team comprises a panel of individuals with the necessary experience and skills to undertake the assignments. For volunteers who do not have the required skills but are interested to be part of the team, NCBM will conduct training sessions for them. Great care will be taken to ensure that team members have the right attitude and approaches towards the BVI clients. The team members will be given allowances while on assignments and they will be reimbursed for travelling expenses when attending to the clients.

In order to ensure the smooth and effective implementation of the programme, the team members are expected to carry out the work in accordance with some comprehensive guidelines on qualifications, code of conduct when attending to clients, and the procedure of claims.

Skills and Areas to be Given Attention

The following are some of the skills and matters to be given attention when visiting the clients. The list, however, will not be limited to those being mentioned here.

They include Malay and English Braille, orientation and mobility, I.T. and adaptive technology, repair and servicing of Braille equipment, daily living skills, social communication, counselling, as well as health and wellness matters.

Functions of the Vision Team

Some of the functions include the following:

1. Conducting an initial assessment on the client's needs.
2. Providing individualised training at the client's home.
3. Referring clients for required assistance or training from the relevant agencies or centres.

4. Helping the elderly BVI individuals and the BVI's with additional disabilities staying on their own to cope with urgent needs.

Area of Operation

The NCBM Vision Network will, in fact, be operating nationwide. NCBM could be the first point of contact with the clients. Member-organisations covering the region will then be contacted to provide the service.

However, the NCBM Vision Network will only take action if member-organisations are not able to reach out to these people. The Vision Team will also help in monitoring the progress of the case.

In fact, the NCBM Vision Network operates under the commercial concept of “Delivering the Goods from the Nearest Warehouse”.

PLACING THE BLIND IN EMPLOYMENT

By Dr. Wong Huey Siew,

Chairman of the NCBM Committee on Employment and Economic Empowerment

At the NCBM brain-storming workshop concerning placement and employment support services for the blind which was held at the Crystal Crown Hotel, Petaling Jaya from November 28-29, 2012, one of the highlights was the launching of the NCBM Job Pioneering Scheme and the Distribution of application forms for participation in the scheme. The main objective of the scheme is to encourage would-be employers to employ more BVI persons and to motivate BVI persons to explore new fields of employment.

Under this scheme, NCBM will partner with prospective employers who would be willing to provide employment opportunities for BVI persons. NCBM will pay the BVI persons a monthly allowance of RM1,200 during the trial period of between three to six months. It is hoped that by the end of the specified period, the employers will be convinced enough of their capabilities, thereafter providing them with suitable employment.

In the first of five sessions, entitled “My Concept of a Placement and Employment Service for the Blind”, Dato’ Dr. Hsiung Kwo Yeun outlined the three areas of focus by SKSB, i.e. a database of the BVI’s in Sarawak, job analysis and availability, and identification of job opportunities for the blind.

In her presentation, Datuk Rosalind Chew from the Sabah Society for the Blind stressed that the collecting and updating of relevant data would be most useful for job placements. She suggested setting up an advisory committee to liaise with the Government and private sector and to have appropriate job training programmes in order to showcase the talents of BVI persons.

Mr. Daniel Soon from St. Nicholas’ Home said that due to the rapid technological advancements taking place, many factory jobs that used to be performed by the blind had become redundant. In fact, less than 10% of the BVI’s made use of the training that had been given them by SNH. Therefore, training should move to a higher level to embrace Information Technology

and that more support services were required for those wanting to join the open market. Entrepreneurship, cooperatives and sheltered employment should be given serious consideration. He said that the role of NCBM should be to advocate for the necessary changes in the education programme to meet the current demands.

En. Faizal said that although SBM had no job placement unit, support was being given to its members in entrepreneurship and massage skills training.

Prof. Datuk (Dr.) Abdullah Malim Baginda from the Malaysian Association for the Blind said that besides training, the BVI's should also be retrained in order to keep pace with the changing job demands. Then he raised a very interesting point – would it be better for one organisation to do the training while another body takes on job placement? Or should one body undertake both the tasks?

In the second session, the topic was “Expectations from Employees and Their Supporting Organisations”. Matters that emerged in the panel discussion were the need for productivity, creativity and innovativity. The employees must have the skills in communication and decision-making, with integrity and discipline, and be equipped with adequate knowledge and information. In other words, they must go for re-training, because the employers want value for money.

In the third session concerning “Our Satisfaction, Frustrations and Limitations”, some of the views expressed were the irresponsible behaviour of some BVI employees, the negative attitudes of some employers in hiring BVI workers, and the lack of proper training for job placement personnel.

Suggestions were that formal and informal education should be given from young, there should be exchanging of work experiences among the personnel of member-organisations, career counselling on job preparation, and the reintroduction of the NCBM Career Motivation Camp, a training module for job placement officers, establishing a support group of successful BVI's, Sponsoring of university post-graduate gatherings to tap their experiences, career counselling for the BVI's, establishing an OKU cooperative, and the setting up of sheltered workshops.

In the fourth session on the topic, “What Ought to be Done by the Placement Service”, some of the opinions expressed were that the BVI’s needed self-confidence and the ability to solve their own problems, too much of spoon-feeding being given, the need for BVI role models, and a paradigm shift for the BVI’s to make their own career choices with support assistance from the member-organisations.

In the last session to formulate an Action Plan, the workshop agreed to the following actions:

1. To set up a task force to implement the plan of action.
2. To draw up a draft action plan for adoption by the task force.
3. To determine the role and commitment of NCBM and its member-organisations in the implementation of the workshop recommendations.

Recommendations

Role of the Government:

1. To set up a job placement unit for the OKU under the Jabatan Tenaga Kerja to do the following:
 - 1.1 Implement the 1% Employment Policy for the Disabled.
 - 1.2 Encourage career development among the blind (including O and M) while they are in school by matching their aspirations with training opportunities.
 - 1.3 Promote employment for the disabled in the private sector by highlighting the tax incentives being offered by the Government.
 - 1.4 Create and maintain a database of blind job-seekers and those in employment in the public and private sectors.

Role of National Council for the Blind, Malaysia (NCBM) :

1. Track the progress of the 1% Employment Policy by the Government by highlighting best practices and addressing the challenges in implementing the 1% Policy.
2. Design a module to train job placement officers.
3. Reintroduce the motivation camps that had been organised by NCBM together with the member-organisations and the Special Education Division from 2006-2007.
4. Collaborate with member-organisations to set up support services for blind job-seekers (including O and M, accessible technology and counselling). Blind individuals with the necessary qualifications and expertise should be given the opportunity to take up responsible positions in this area.
5. Set up a panel of blind mentors to provide the necessary advice and support for the blind wishing to venture into a particular field.
6. Sponsor gatherings of blind university graduates to get inputs on their success and challenges in getting employment. The findings will be useful for future students wishing to further their studies.
7. Work with certified blind counsellors to design a career counselling module for the blind. This module will be used to motivate blind students in schools or training in the training centres.
8. Facilitate the exchange of experiences and views of personnel engaged in job-placement of member-organisations.
9. The NCBM Employment Committee will design a Job Readiness Programme for member-organisations to ascertain whether the blind job-seekers are sufficiently equipped before taking up employment. This programme will include the do's and don'ts at interviews, resume writing, social skills, knowledge in ICT, O and M, etc.

Role of Member-organisations :

10. Foster a conducive working environment so that the placement officers will be motivated to carry out their duties properly.
11. Work with NCBM and member-organisations in providing timely support services to the blind throughout the country.
12. Set up a mechanism to provide services to blind entrepreneurs in such areas as accounting, filling tax returns, writing business proposals, etc.
13. Set up social enterprises to provide sheltered employment for the blind with additional disabilities such as the laundry service, sub-contract work, handicraft-making, etc.

Role of Blind Individuals:

14. Give their time and expertise to serve in the “Panel of Blind Mentors”.
15. Blind counsellors be recruited to provide career counselling to the blind while in school or in the training centre.

MAKING ACCESSIBLE TOURISM A REALITY

By Chester Chin

“The rights of people with disabilities is about accessibility, dignity and equality. It’s never about charity,” said an elected public official at the launching of the 5th International Conference on Accessible Tourism. He was referring to the right to barrier-free travel.

The conference was held in Petaling Jaya, Selangor in December, 2014.

It was impossible not to be moved by the hopeful cheers of those in the hall. Most of them were vision-impaired or wheelchair-bound and they comprised people of over 25 nationalities. What was said at the conference resonated with them.

It was about how the fulfilment of their needs was constantly being seen as philanthropy. They felt that it was their right rather than their privileged to unhindered travel.

“We have to consider that tourists with disabilities are customers but they are not a segment on their own. They too have purchasing behaviour similar to other tourists and so travel operators should take their specific needs into account,” said Anna Laura, president of the European Network on Accessible Tourism (ENAT).

She added, “A tourist with disabilities is first of all a tourist, someone wishing to go on holidays at destinations of his or her choice. So we must consider the fact that they want to see a place of their choice without any hindrance.”

For this to happen, visitors must be ensured of uninterrupted accessibility on their travels, from arrival to departure. For a smooth and satisfactory journey, Laura suggested looking at accessible tourism as a business rather than as a form of social responsibility.

Accessible tourism, as a business, encompasses four essentials – information, transport, infrastructure and services. These must be delivered by travel operators for destinations throughout the entire duration of the person’s holiday.

Those four essentials are not so different from what able-bodied holiday-goers would expect from their travels.

Joseph Kwan, Global Chair of the International Commission on Technology and Accessibility (Rehabilitation International), said that there are other areas that must also be addressed concerning tourism for people with disabilities.

“The relevant parties have to take all appropriate measures to ensure that people with disabilities have access, in terms of equal opportunities, to locations providing a service or cultural events such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries, and as far as possible, access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance, “the experienced architect and access consultant offered.

He said the tourism stake-holders should identify the current status of infrastructures in the cities. They should advocate for the removal of obstacles that hinder or prevent the travel of those with disabilities. He agreed that while businesses play a role in developing this market, the participation of government bodies is crucial.

The human touch, such as mobility assistance from an airport employee, can also contribute to a barrier-free travel for tourists with disabilities.

Kwan added, “The tourism ministry has to consider tourism as a sustainable economic activity with an important role in generating employment and foreign exchange. He stressed the need to develop an effective policy for inclusive tourism, with emphasis on knowing the profiles of current and potential tourists with disabilities.

Laura commented that the various relevant bodies should come together to make accessible tourism feasible.

“NGO’s are vital. They could promote and provide education in regard to tourists with disabilities. They will have a better understanding of what these customers need. The role of social organisations, government agencies and economic operators should be clearly defined.”

The upcoming audio-descriptive guided walks at the heritage trails in Georgetown, Penang are proof that accessible tourism is possible with cooperation from the various stake-holders. This is a joint effort by the National Council for the Blind, Malaysia (NCBM), the Georgetown World Heritage Inc., and the Friends of Georgetown Heritage.

Wong Yoon Loong, the Manager of the NCBM Centre for Advocacy Research and Empowerment (CARE), said, “Audio-description often refers only to the art forms and not tourism. With this project in Georgetown, we are saying that audio-description should be included as a service for heritage sites and buildings. This will make the UNESCO World Heritage Sites accessible to vision-impaired people.”

He added, “When it comes to accessible tourism, the travel operators must ensure that there are no barriers to prevent a disabled person from travelling. This includes the right to transportation.”

NCBM will provide training in audio-description for the vision-impaired, the Georgetown World Heritage will provide administrative assistance, while the Friends of Georgetown, a group of trained and certified volunteers, will design a special three-hour walk through the island.

Wong said that the project will be launched during the UNESCO World Heritage celebration for Georgetown in July 2015. New heritage trails will be developed by the end of 2015.

“Depending on the public’s response, we will see if we can extend this project to other parts of Malaysia in 2016,”said Wong.

According to Beautiful Gate Foundation for the disabled Executive Director, Sia Siew Chin, “Encouraging response from the Government is integral in making accessible tourism a widespread concept in any destination.”

She noted that thus far, the state Governments in Penang and Selangor have been particularly receptive to the concept of accessible tourism.

Beautiful Gate, which co organised the conference with the Malaysian Council for Rehabilitation, will be submitting to the Tourism Ministry the resolutions drafted at the event. The recommended measures include reviewing tourism policies, adopting internationally recognised universal design standards for buildings, and promoting guidelines for accessible information and signages.

Kwan pointed out that travel and full access to tourist activities, services and facilities are a right enshrined in Article 9 and Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

He concluded, “Besides, making facilities and tourist services more accessible to people with disabilities can represent a great opportunity to attract a greater number of consumers to the tourism sector.”

EXCURSION TO SUNGAI LEMBING

By Grace Lim Siew Chong

Editor's note: Grace Lim Siew Chong is the coordinator of the Yoga Group which is one of the interest groups under the Elderly Blind Club of MAB. The Yoga programme is held on Tuesday mornings at the Judo Centre in Kompleks MAB and it was initiated by Grace Lim in 2011 with about ten blind participants (including blind adults and elderly blind persons). Eight sighted volunteers rotate among themselves as instructors for the Yoga programme.

The Yoga Group recently organised an excursion to Sungai Lembing. Here is Grace Lim to tell the story:



The excursion to Sungai Lembing in Pahang was organised by the Yoga Group of MAB from April 25-26, 2015. Twelve blind persons and fourteen sighted volunteers took part in the excursion. Our two volunteer leaders were Miss Kelly Lew and Mr Xiao Lee, whom I had met in another excursion organised by the wheelchair-users earlier in March this year. I requested for their assistance in organising the excursion for the blind to Sungai Lembing and they kindly agreed. They managed to get ten of their sighted friends to help as volunteers.

Two other volunteers are actually a newly married couple from India, Vidya Krishnan and K. Venkatesan. Vidya started serving as a volunteer typist at the MAB library early this year. When we asked whether she might be interested to be a volunteer guide for the Sungai Lembing trip, she immediately agreed and got her husband to be involved.

Early on Saturday morning at about 7.30 a.m., we set off in a bus under the able hands of a superb driver, Mr. Chua. At about 10 o'clock, we stopped by at a rest area for breakfast and then proceeded on our journey. At around 12 noon, we arrived at our first visiting place which was called the Dragon Temple. This temple, measuring about 900 metres (or nearly one kilometre) in length, takes about twenty minutes to walk right through it. You enter the temple at the tail end of the dragon and you exit through its mouth, meaning that you have gone through a process of change with the promise of good luck in your future life.



The temple was built in the 1980's with the objective of preserving some of the Chinese traditions. It is actually a tunnel-like structure in the shape of a dragon with windows punched along its sides to keep the place airy and sunlit during the day. All kinds of trees had their branches protruding into the tunnel through the windows and some of them brushed on to my cheeks as if to say, "Hello". At one part of the tunnel, we came across so many durian flowers, which had fallen from the trees on to the ground of the temple.

As we approached the end of the tunnel, we were greeted by the sweet cheerful bird-song of the swallows – and truly, we thought they were the real swallows! However, we were informed that we were actually listening to the recording of the swallows which was being played in order to attract the swallows from the wild to come and build their nests. These bird's nest (known as Yin Wor in Chinese) would then be gathered for the production of a special drink very popular among the Chinese; and so this 'Yin Wor' is exported to China.



At the end of the tunnel, we emerged out of the dragon's mouth into an orchard with so many kinds of fruit trees (including durian, mangosteen and nangka (or jackfruit). My blind friends were very fascinated with the great bunches of durian flowers which were hanging so low down from the durian branches, something they had never seen before. As for me, I had seen them in my kampong in Baling, Kedah.

One of the blind participants exclaimed, "Wow! The durian flowers are so many, so reachable and so wonderful to touch! I never dreamed of seeing so many durian flowers in my life!"

Indeed, there were so many durian flowers strewn all over the ground that we were literally stepping on heaps and heaps of them under our feet. Another participant said, "What a waste – a pity the durian flowers can't be eaten!"

While he picked up as many durian flowers as he could and crammed them into his shirt pocket, the temple guide said, “Oh, some people use the durian flowers to make sambal.” I myself marvelled at the fact that although so many durian flowers had fallen on to the ground, the flowers hanging from the durian trees were still in such great abundance.



The temple guide then told us that we could come back in July to eat the durian. He said this would be the durian season and many tourists, especially from China, would love to come here and taste the durian. Then the guide also showed us some giant plastic models of the dinosaurs. We were quite surprised as we thought this was an orchard. He then explained that they were actually still in the process of developing the place for tourism.

At about 12.30 p.m., we adjourned for lunch in Sungai Lembing town. We learned that the town was divided into three main sections – the first or outer section being populated by the Malays, the second or middle section by the Chinese, and the third inner section by the Indians. At the Chinese restaurant in the middle section, we had a sumptuous meal of ‘bak kut teh’ plus chicken and roast pork with a variety of vegetables. When the restaurant owner (who had partly subsidised the meal) came out of the kitchen and saw so many blind participants, he decided to provide several more vegetable dishes for our vegetarian volunteers free of charge.



After lunch, we proceeded to the Hanging Bridge which had been built across the Lembing River. (“Lembing” means “Spear”- unfortunately, no one could explain how the river got its name). The river was only a few inches deep but it was quite wide – it took us about twenty minutes to walk across to the village on the other side.



There were some shophouses where we could buy a lot of packed goodies like biscuits, coffee, tea, sweets, jellies and lemons. I had a lovely bowl of ‘tow foo fah’ (bean curd dessert)cooked with the water from the mountain waterfall. Then as we were returning across the bridge, I thought I heard a motor-boat (which could not be because the water was so shallow) and it turned out to be a motor-bike waiting patiently for us to cross the bridge before he went over to the village.

At about 3.30 p.m., we checked into the Riverview Resort. Later, everyone gathered at the recreational area for a training session with the volunteers on the guiding techniques of leading the blind. For the first round in climbing up and down the stair-case, the blind would be guided by the volunteers, with the blind holding on lightly to their arm slightly above the elbow or by placing a hand upon the shoulder of the volunteer. For the second round, the volunteers would be guided by their blind partners instead. Then in the third round, the volunteers would walk up and down the stairs by themselves blind-folded with the white-cane in one hand and holding on to the railing with the other.



For the fourth round, the volunteers had to climb up and down the stairs blind-folded without the help of the cane and without holding on to the banister. Well, only a few volunteers really dared to take on this challenge.



Anyway, everyone enjoyed the training session very much. One of the blind participants, George Wong, was so pleased that he proposed holding such training sessions every year with new techniques and other ideas added on to the programme.



In the evening, we had a barbecue dinner at the resort. I felt that we were so lucky to be able to meet the business entrepreneur and boss of the resort, Mr. Ho, who had also given a generous subsidy for the meal. He said that this was the first time in about ten years of running the restaurant that he had ever been patronised by blind customers. He felt greatly inspired and would have loved giving the chance for the blind to experience barbecuing the food; however, he preferred to be careful as he feared that it would be quite dangerous.

He then told us that he used to employ people from outside to come and prepare the barbecue but he noticed that the number of customers was growing less and less. So he went back to the idea of letting his wife to be in charge of the whole process and barbecuing the food and then the number of customers started growing more and more. And so he hoped that we would enjoy the food that had been prepared by his wife. And Yes, we had a really good barbecue dinner!

We then adjourned to the games room where some of us sang songs accompanied by my assistant organiser, Godfrey Ooi, on the guitar. Others played games like carrom and darts. Then we all retired early to bed in eager anticipation of the morning wake-up call at 4 a.m.



Next morning we took the ten-minute bus ride to the Lembing Hill. We had been informed that sighted people normally took about 45 minutes to reach the hill-top. For three of the blind participants (including myself), we took only about 30 minutes to reach the top while many of the others took about one hour. Besides our volunteers, there were many other sighted climbers waiting to see the sunrise. Unfortunately, the sun was too shy and hid among the clouds; but the light from the sun made the clouds look so beautiful and colourful, according to our sighted friends.



Our tourist guide said that from the peak of about 400 metres in height, he could see the whole town of Lembing glowing from the lights below. He told us that Sungai Lembing used to be a tin-mining town which had been opened up even before the British came to Malaya in the 1880's. The Chinese had been invited by the Sultan of Pahang to come over from China to help open up the tin mine. In fact, the Sungai Lembing Tin Mine is said to be one of the biggest, deepest and oldest underground tin mines in the world. More recently in the 1980's, Sungai Lembing was hit by the financial crisis and it became a dead town; now, however, the town is being revived through tourism.



Climbing down the hill was much easier and some of us took only twenty minutes while others still took about one hour. The tourist guide told us that there were actually 1,100 (or eleven hundred) steps to climb. There were many climbers from Kuantan, Kuala Lumpur and other states like Selangor and as far as Johor. They were so surprised when they saw us, the blind climbers, and some of them came to catch hold of our hands for fear that we might fall. When we explained that we could manage and only needed some guidance, they were amazed and they congratulated us. Later, as we took a stroll in the market, the tourist guide said that this was probably the first time that the public had seen so many blind people and it was really an education for them.



Then we returned to the Resort to pack our things. Before leaving, we visited the garden of fruit trees in the resort. We saw a very big mangosteen tree and I touched one of the biggest chempedak in my life!

On the way back to K.L., we were told that our oldest participant, George Wong at age 79, was among the first of the climbers to reach the top of the hill. Another of our participants, a blind lady in her early 70's, also managed to make it all the way up and down the hill. Both of them said that the steps and the railings were a great help in enabling them to make the climb. George Wong also had the strong arm of the volunteer, Mr Ng, to give him support.



We made our final stop in Gambang town where we had another delicious lunch at the Hongkong Star Restaurant. Again a very generous subsidy was given by the restaurant owner for the meal and we are truly grateful.

In concluding, I want to say a very big “Thank You” to Kelly and Xiao Lee for helping with the arrangements, without which the trip would not have materialised. In getting the subsidy sponsorships for the meals, we understand that they had a very tough time convincing the restaurant owners of their genuine purpose in helping the blind. Also, they did not have an easy time trying to get their friends to come as volunteers as they had so many excuses! But, in the end, after such a tough struggle, Kelly and Siow Lee succeeded. We truly appreciate their efforts in finally achieving such a positive outcome. To the restaurant owners and to all our volunteers, we extend our heartfelt thanks and appreciation.

According to Larry Teh (better known as Teh Tarik), of all the trips that he had participated in, this was the best ever that he had enjoyed.

My sincere and grateful thanks to everyone for having made the Sungai Lembing trip such a memorable one for me!

NEWS FROM THE ORGANISATIONS SERVING THE BLIND

*Message From The Advisor,
Godfrey Ooi Goat See, AMN*



With the successful screening of *Are You Blind, Part I*, that reached about 17 million viewers, Jason the producer and Director decided to work with NCBM on producing the second part. While the second part is not a direct continuation from the first, it continues in the same vein in highlighting the problems encountered by the blind but from a different perspective.

Rather than making complaints about the inaccessible environment with many barriers, Part II focuses on how the blind have been able to overcome the challenges in trying to live a normal life. However, the facilities or features in the scene may not be a reality in Malaysia, as for example, there is no escalator or walkalator in Malaysia that has been equipped with sound to facilitate the mobility of the blind. Thus, while a particular place in Malaysia is being featured, the audio signals have been recorded at other locations such as in Hong Kong.

The video actually highlights a young composer's dream of her possibly becoming blind. The beautiful composer thinks of the positive things that the blind can do as they go about their daily lives.

This is only a dream, however, and it serves to remind everyone that blindness does not take into consideration one's racial or national origins. Anyone can become blind at any time and, therefore, one should not take his or her sight for granted.

Furthermore, the movie aims to send a message that if everyone in the Public and in the Government adopts positive thinking and helps to build the barrier-free environment with the universal design and accessibility, this will be a better place for everyone to live in.

The movie was screened at NU Sentral on Sunday, March 29, 2015 and the presenters were NCBM, The Golden Screen Cinema, and Jason Lim from Jason Lim Productions.

The movie was quite emotional for some of the spectators but that was not the intention; the main objective was to tell everyone that while this may be a world for the seeing but there is no harm in making it accessible to those who cannot see.

Some of the blind commented that in order for such a movie to be produced and to meet the high expectations of the public, they had to carry out their performances so many times in order to make it perfect.

Jason Lim said, "This is an effort put in by the blind in producing something for the viewing of the seeing."

The MAB Restructuring Plan

The two main core businesses of the Malaysian Association for the Blind have traditionally been two-fold – education, Rehabilitation and Training as well as Services and After-Care for the Blind.

If the restructuring plans of MAB are followed through, the organisation will see the setting up of four main divisions –

Education, Training and ICT which includes the Gurney Training Centre; Taman Harapan; Kinta Valley Centre; ICT; Deaf-Blind and Multi-

Handicapped programme; Education and Capacity-Building; plus Research and Development.

The second division will be Services and After-Care, which will include Job Placement and Job Coaching; Welfare and Outreach Care; Community-based Rehabilitation; Access and Advocacy; Recreational and Social Activities; Library and Braille Resource Centre; plus the Volunteer Development Programme.

The third division will be Operations and Maintenance, including Fund-Raising; Public Relations; Assets and Finance; Human Resources and Administration.

The fourth division will be Sales, Marketing and Production, which will include the Braille Publishing Unit; Sales Shop; Massage Shops; Braille and Equipment repairs; plus Rattan and Handicrafts.

Each of these divisions will be headed by a director with the possibility of them being headed up by an honorary Director.

Three New Staff for the Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM)

SBM has taken in three new staff for their headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. They reported for duty on May 5, 2015.

They are Miss Nurfarahin bt. Jaafar from Melaka (aged 26) as the Executive Secretary, Miss Nurfarahin bt. Norzaini from Kuala Krai, Kelantan (aged 25) as the Assistant Administrator, and Mr. Muhammad Akmal Hafizudin bin Khiarudin from Segambut Dalam, Kuala Lumpur (aged 27) as the Finance Administrative Assistant.

New Line-up for the Kuala Lumpur/Selangor Branch Committee

At the Kuala Lumpur/Selangor Branch Biennial General Meeting of SBM held on May 23, 2015 (Saturday) at the City Villa Hotel, persons elected into the Branch Committee are :-

Puan Rosnah bt. Haji Ahmad as Chairwoman,
Encik Esa Taib as Deputy Chairman
Miss Anna Loo as Secretary
Mr Cheah Bok Keat as Treasurer

with the five Committee Members being Puan Rosmaria Ahmad, Puan Jamaliah Sidi, Puan Seri Alam Mansor, Encik Amir Samsudin, and Encik Yazid Mohd. Noor.

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- Education, Rehabilitation and Training for the Blind;
- Services and After-Care for the Blind.

If the restructuring plans of MAB are followed through, the organisation will see the setting up of four main divisions as follows:

1. Education, Training and ICT

This will include the Gurney Training Centre, Taman Harapan, the Kinta Valley Centre, ICT, Deaf-Blind and Multi-Handicapped Programme, Education and Capacity-Building, plus Research and Development.

2. Services and After-Care

This will include Job Placement and Job Coaching, Welfare and Outreach Care, Community-Based Rehabilitation, Access and Advocacy, Recreational and Social Activities, Library and Braille Resource Centre, plus the Volunteer Development Programme.

3. Operations and Maintenance

This will include Fund-Raising, Public Relations, Assets and Finance, Human Resources and Administration.

4. Sales, Marketing and Production

This includes Marketing and Production, the Braille Publishing Unit, Sales Shop, Massage Shops, Rattan and Handicrafts, plus Braille and Equipment Repairs.

Each of these divisions will be headed by a director with the possibility of them being headed up by an executive director or perhaps an Honorary Director.

Concerning the first division (which is Education, Training and ICT), the areas of focus to be considered will be:

- a) the One-Stop Rehabilitation Programme at the Kinta Valley Centre for the adult blind, Senior Citizens, the Deaf-Blind and the Multi-Handicapped. This will include a Sheltered Workshop, Hostel and Early Intervention Programme.
- b) Certificate Skilled-Based Courses at Taman Harapan which will include Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Massage, Reflexology, Office Management and Computer System Operations.
- c) Skill-Based courses on the Diploma Level at the GTC. In fact, the three centres will compliment one another in meeting the needs of the blind.
- d) ICT :
This will include on-line courses and short courses on ICT, Adaptive Technology, Website management and its maintenance.
- e) Education and Capacity-Building:
Opportunities will be provided for the blind to upgrade knowledge and skills through scholarships and sponsorships for courses at MAB or outside institutions (including Music, Cooking, Games, Leadership

Training and Entrepreneurial Development).

Personal Development Workshops and seminars could also be organised for the blind and for volunteers, parents, spouses, and even professionals from related fields.

f) Research Activities:

Such activities could be organised through collaborative efforts with other institutions, particularly universities and various educational institutes.

**Bright Path Ahead for Blind Student, Kaveinthran A/L Pulanthran :
Top scorer aims to help people in need**



He has a big mission – Kaveinthran A/L Pulanthran, blind STPM top scorer for year 2014 wants to help those with emotional problems after as her graduates as Psychologist.

Kaveinthran says, “There are so many people suffering from psychological problems and I intend to give them free advice.”

Aged 20, Kaveinthran scored four A’s in last year’s STPM examination. The St. John’s Bukit Nanas student said that he was highly motivated after receiving a RM200,000 grant to continue his studies in the United States.

He was handed a cheque of RM150,000 from the Community Builder's Foundation by MIC President, Datuk Seri G. Palaniappan and another cheque of RM50,000 from the Tan Sri Manickavasagam Education Fund. "The grant is a boost and life-line for me and I'm so thankful to the Minister," said Kaveenar.

He added, "The total fee for a four-year course is about RM 750,000 or about RM 230,000 a year."

The Elderly Blind Climb Bukit Gasing



The climb up Bukit Gasing in Petaling Jaya was organised by the Elderly Blind Club of MAB on June 6, 2015 (Saturday). There were at least twelve blind participants, some of whom were already in their sixties. Assisting them in the climb were about fifteen sighted volunteers. Leading the climbers was the Vice Chairman of the Club Mr K.K. Goh, with the help and guidance of his volunteer, Ms Yow Lai Kit.

It was actually their second time climbing up Bukit Gasing this year and they planned to reach the top of the hill within two hours. The first time they had climbed Bukit Gasing was on March 21 2015 but they were very surprised to have reached the peak in one hour. Subsequently, they learned that it was the viewing tower that they had reached in about two hours and that was

actually only the half way mark up the hill. Hence, they felt very dissatisfied and they were determined to climb the hill again in order to reach the top this time within two hours. On their second climb, however, they made some very interesting discoveries – Bukit Gasing was actually not just one single mountain but it really consisted of a number of hills. Therefore, one could not say that one would like to reach the top of Bukit Gasing.

In fact, The climbers first had to negotiate one hill which they managed to accomplish within two hours. Then they had to make their way down a hill and then up again to another hill known as the Mother Peak, which they did so within the third hour.

According to one of the climbers, the Mother Peak deserved to be called as such since it was reminiscent of Mount Kinabalu in Sabah with its huge and steep giant rocky steps.

To add to the excitement, the climbers discovered that there was a rope bridge along which they could walk for about eighty feet amongst the tree-tops. This they did with great jubilation before traversing up the great big stones to the Mother Peak. The first to arrive on the top of the Mother Peak were Godfrey Ooi and his volunteer, Kathy Low.



On the way down, one could avoid the rope bridge by taking the short cut. The climbers were thus able to make their way down just within half an hour or so.



Therefore, although the elderly blind could not find the top of Bukit Gasing (because there was no single mountain-top to be reached), they were very happy with the outcome. They had managed to achieve their ultimate goal of reaching one of the hill-tops in two hours. In the end, they had managed to climb up and down the hill within four hours.

St. Nicholas' Home Promotes Education for the Blind

Realising the inequity of the situation being faced by the blind in education, St. Nicholas' home has initiated a number of projects to meet these needs. They include:

1. A TASKA or Pre-school Programme for vision-impaired children in Penang in 2010. The TASKA is also actively engaged in developing resources to offer training and support to other mainstream TASKA Programmes which will accept blind children through an inclusive programme on their premises.
2. An accessible website with study resources available for blind students Free of Charge.
3. Providing Resources, Support and Assistance for blind students in graduate courses in Public and Private educational institutions.

The Deaf-Blind Multi-Handicapped Programme at St. Nicholas' Home

Effective February 2013, the teachers at the St. Nicholas' DBMH Programme began using calendar system boxes to teach the children how to organise their daily activity schedules.

One of the class-rooms was converted into a therapy room where occupational therapy and physiotherapy sessions are conducted for the children.

The weekly schedule of functional activities include Music with Sing-Along, Dancing and Playing of Instruments; Indoor and Outdoor Play with Sand, Water and other material resources; Outings such as Shopping and Visits; and even Gardening and Crafts.

Refresh and Rejuvenate at the St. Nicholas' Wellness Centre

Their team of professionals with visual-impairment are certified in the field of wellness by the National Vocational Training Council. The treatment menu includes full body massage therapy, therapeutic back massage, and foot reflexology.

Michael and Helenn Wevers from Australia, having moved to Penang under the "Malaysia My Second Home Programme", were very impressed with the blind masseurs and they have become regular customers. They have also offered to help upgrade the Wellness Centre at their own cost in order to bring in more customers.

They have given the Centre a fresh new look by repainting and redecorating the interior spaces. They have donated wall pictures, two sofa sets, and a hot towel machine. They have even provided the promotion stickers and the banner at the entrance of St. Nicholas' Home.

The “Cycle of Friends” – SNH Tandem-Biking

Can you ride a bicycle? Do you love meeting new people? Do you love sharing the joy of cycling with others? Can you spare two to three hours on a Sunday morning?

Well, there’s nothing more refreshing than having the cool morning breeze blowing in your face, meeting new friends and getting a much needed workout. And while you do all that for yourself, you are also providing the chance for a vision-impaired or blind person to exercise and lead a healthier life-style. It also helps the blind gain access to a wider network of friends and instil in them a sense of exploration and confidence to attempt new things.

In fact, St. Nicholas’ Home has since 2013 been trying to bring back tandem-cycling in Penang and they have succeeded! Thanks to the zealous efforts of Ms. Ooi Geok Ling and her team at Penang Global Tourism, St. Nick’s received twenty new bikes in addition to their earlier ten. The folks at PGT were very committed in fulfilling their pledge to get more bikes after a joy-ride together with the blind in December 2012. Contributions for the tandem-bikes came flowing in from their staff members, family members, individuals and companies.

THE AER INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2014

By Sumitha Ramasamy

The Association of Education and Rehabilitation (AER) International Conference was held at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in San Antonio, Texas from July 30 to August 3, 2014. The Conference was attended by about 850 participants and delegates, mainly from the United States and several other countries (including Malaysia). Malaysia was represented by Ms. Sumitha Ramasamy – Principal of the Gurney Training Centre, Encik Thavasoathy – MAB Council Member, and Ms. Kavitha Govindaraj – Coordinator of the Deaf-Blind Programme in MAB.

AER is a Non-Governmental Organisation based in Alexandria, Virginia and its mission is to support professionals who provide Education and Rehabilitation Services to the visually impaired. Being international in scope, the AER membership consists of a very diverse group of persons, including administrators, vision rehabilitation therapists (formerly known as Rehabilitation Teachers), Orientation and Mobility Specialists, low-vision therapists, itinerant teachers, and support personnel working with infants, children, teenagers, adults, seniors and veterans.

The conference programme mainly focused on learning, experiencing, sharing and cutting-edge technology.

Concerning Orientation and Mobility, the focus was on the combination of white cane techniques and the usage of various adaptive devices to create a better performance of the skill. For example, the Brain Port V100 is a non-surgical adaptive device to help in object identification and spot reading by individuals with residual vision. It translates digital information from a video-camera into gentle electrical stimulation patterns on the surface of the tongue. This enables the users to interpret bubble-like patterns on the tongue into shape, size, location and motion of objects in the environment. In fact, the Brain Port V100 is intended to augment, rather than replace, other assistive technologies such as the white cane or dog-guide.

In this connection, it is quite obvious that most of O and M trainers lack adequate knowledge and skills in the new approaches in the teaching of Orientation and Mobility. In fact, the number of qualified personnel in the organizations serving the blind is declining. Therefore, in order to deal with this problem, consistent training programmes should be made available periodically either by providing practical courses or through on-line programmes or even in collaboration with the higher institutions of learning.

Being an educational and informative organization, AER has, in fact, managed to assemble many experts and professionals together in order to share their knowledge and ideas. All the information has been made accessible through their website. In this context, therefore, I feel that Malaysia should become a member of AER through its International Division which will be established in 2016. This will surely help to make much more information available among the people in this part of the world.

Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB)

On our way back to Malaysia, we had the privilege of visiting the Hong Kong Society for the Blind. The main objectives were to establish links and to obtain ideas for the improvement and development of our Rehabilitation and Deaf-Blind Programmes in Malaysia.

During the tour, the barrier-free facilities made available at all parts of the premises particularly captivated my interest. Besides the embossed tactile flooring, there were the wall-trailing handbars, voice-over signage and location maps in order to ensure effective accessibility for the blind and visually impaired. Different flooring materials are also used in their training rooms to enable the blind to adapt to the different environments. Moreover, the training rooms were equipped with various embossed maps, low-vision aids, training materials and a wide range of white canes for choice. This is indeed a very useful concept that could be introduced in Malaysia.

Furthermore, we learned that high priority was being given for the blind with additional disabilities at HKSB. Besides the Training Manuals, Individualized Social Plans, and Tactual Sign-Language, there were also

facilities such as the Multi-Sensory Room, the Physiotherapy Room and the Integrated Rehabilitation Centre for Motor Skills Training. In the Multi-Sensory Room, materials with different textures were used for the wall surfaces and for the flooring while bean-bags were used to create various types of sounds.

In the area of Job Placement, I had the opportunity to meet a visually impaired person who works as the office administrator for several private companies. These companies are able to survive without having any office by assigning someone to handle all their administrative work, especially the in-coming calls. In this way, they are able to avoid much of the overhead costs. In order to support this employment approach, HKSB has introduced a programme that would enable the blind person to be an effective office administrator.

In addition, HKSB runs a Sheltered Workshop where some of the blind are employed to do sewing and make filing stands. The work is being carried out with close supervision.

Conclusion

I believe that some of the activities and services that I have seen in Hong Kong can also be made available in Malaysia. Hence, upon returning from the visit, we felt that it was very important for the information to be disseminated and the ideas to be implemented.

An immediate action that had been taken was to set up the low-vision stimulation room for the blind with additional disabilities and for the deaf-blind at MAB. The project was sponsored by the Berjaya Care Foundation.

Further plans are in the pipeline for the development of the O and M stimulation and training room at the Kinta Valley Rehabilitation Centre in Ipoh, Perak. The Centre is expected to become a one-stop rehabilitation training hub in this region in the near future.

In my view, the entire trip had been very fruitful. I would, therefore, recommend that such opportunities should be made available to many other relevant personnel from various organizations serving the blind. This will enable them to upgrade their knowledge and skills so that they can perform more effectively for the betterment of the blind.

Acknowledgement

My heartfelt thanks to NCBM and MAB for having jointly sponsored our trip, thereby making it possible for us to attend the AER International Conference in America and to visit the work for the blind in Hong Kong. With the knowledge and information gained, we are able to make a more positive contribution in the development of the work for the blind in Malaysia.

SBM IN CHANGING TIMES

By Daud M. Amin

Editor's note: Daud M. Amin presented this paper at the Convention held in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the Society of the Blind in Malaysia from November 28-30, 2014. The venue of the Convention was the Hotel Midah, Jalan Kampong Attap, Kuala Lumpur.

Here is what he said:

It all began in 1964 when a group of blind men and women residing in the Klang Valley gathered together to form a club known as the Selangor Society of the Blind (SSB). With a handful of members, SSB held its activities (mainly singing and indoor games) or meetings in one of the members' living apartment. Hats were passed around each time SSB wanted to have a gathering. As it became too frequent and the pockets of members were running dry, SSB decided to raise funds from members of the public.

It was because of these fund-raising efforts that got SSB entangled with MAB which used to have the exclusive rights in raising funds from the public. Thus, a cold war was started between the two organizations.

In the early 70's, SSB was restructured and renamed as the Society of the Blind in West Malaysia (SBWM). Later on, it became the Society of the Blind in Malaysia (or SBM).

Now SBM has an office in every state of the country with a total membership of 3,200 Ordinary Members and 1,150 Associate Members, i.e. 4,350 in all. Briefly, that is the history of SBM in a nutshell.

Fifty Years in a Time Capsule

I note with some sadness that although we have a large membership and many of the members are highly educated, experienced, knowledgeable and still in their prime of youth, yet SBM has not fully exploited the potential of these members in bringing developments in the organization and in the

nation for the benefit of the blind. Apparently, we are still at the stage of trial and error and there has been not very much change. In fact, I find that most of the senior members have found their refuge in Kompleks MAB. Why?

I am really concerned that members from a certain ethnic group seldom participate in the activities of SBM. Why? Do we lack the foresight and are we unwilling to take calculated risks?

Lately, there has been the creation of several organizations purportedly providing services for the blind; they are soliciting funds from the same sources but at the same time enriching themselves.

How to Make SBM Relevant

Certainly, there are many ways to make SBM more workable, meaningful and appreciated in the lives of the blind. Looking into this matter is urgent and imperative. Indeed, I have many thoughts and the list is by no means complete. Here they are:

1. Revamp the Constitution of SBM

We had the opportunity to do so about two years ago – unfortunately, the work of the committee entrusted with the task was hampered.

I understand that the Constitution was reviewed and amended within one and a half days and the proper procedures were not adhered to. Many of the Articles of the Constitution were not discussed in detail. In fact, several of the items in the draft constitution had been taken off without the knowledge of the said Committee.

For example, the item concerning the limitation period of the main office-bearers holding office had been deleted. This means that a person with many supporters could hang on to a post indefinitely and this would prevent new blood, new ideas and new approaches from flowing in.

2. Postal Appeal Letters

Undoubtedly, this has been the most successful method in raising funds for SBM, thanks largely due to the generous and continual support from our donors whose genuine intentions must not be betrayed. Nonetheless, with the growing number of new organizations springing up of late, this has somewhat hampered the flow of funds to SBM. Therefore, I would like to suggest the following:

2.1 An investment arm of SBM be established which would draw support and expertise of knowledgeable and experienced people in the field (including capable blind persons) with the help of paid advisors from the business community.

2.2 Various types of business to look at include the cooperative movement, insurance, transportation service, hotels, office complexes, commercial houses, sports facilities, rental of halls and canopies for wedding functions, etc.

2.3 In the agricultural sector, planting of sandalwood trees or Pokok Gaharu, herbal plants, mushrooms, breeding of fresh-water fish, and purchasing of land for future development. Such business activities could provide employment opportunities for the blind.

Moreover, the profits accrued can be ploughed back into SBM for future expansion and development. In the doing, SBM would be emulating the story of ONCE, the Spanish Organisation of the Blind in becoming a self-supporting body through business ventures.

2.4 The Cooperative Movement

Regarding the Cooperative Movement, we should not delay formation of the cooperative any longer. As for the initial capital, we can surely tap within our own resources. With more than 4,000 members and with each member contributing just RM50, the total amount to be collected would be RM200,000. If SBM were to contribute another RM300,000, this would make a total sum of RM500,000.

2.5 Reviewing and Upgrading Services

A panel should be set up to examine critically whether the services implemented thus far have outlived their usefulness or are they able to continue meeting the present-day needs of the blind. If they are no longer viable, then cut the budget or have the services suspended for a period of time.

The branch offices should be monitored to see whether they are being used meaningfully. If only a handful of members visit the office on the week-ends, then perhaps renting some smaller premises would suffice for operational purposes.

While we may reduce the budget, it could also be increased for certain types of programmes such as the humanitarian services – the death of a member with no next-of-kin to take the necessary actions, assistance for bedridden patients, etc.

3. Just Ponder for a Moment

In order for SBM to stay on course, I would like to suggest new additional services be introduced by citing the following that came to my knowledge for your reflection: -

Case No. 1

Encik Basir (not his real name) lived in K.L. and was married with four children. Soon after his retirement, his wife died. Later, he suffered from a kidney problem and had to make frequent trips to hospital for medical check-ups. Sometimes he failed to turn up as none of his children was able to take leave from work.

Sometimes he would depend on his 8-year-old daughter for assistance. She was happy to assist but this meant having to skip classes.

Subsequently, his kidney deteriorated so that he had to undergo haemodialysis three times a week. Initially, he paid RM40 for each day on taxi fares.

Case No. 2

Asmah and Osman (not their real names) are a blind couple living in K.L. and they make a living through door to door sales. Their income is supplemented by the EPC of RM300 monthly from the welfare department.

Osman had health problems and, under doctor's orders, he had to take a two-month rest at home. Meanwhile, his EPC was temporarily suspended.

In order for his allowance to be reactivated, Osman had to appear personally at the JKM office which was located in an unfamiliar place. The couple, therefore, had to take a taxi which cost them a substantial sum.

Case No. 3

Maniam (not his real name) was a bachelor living on his own in an apartment. He used to be an active member of SBM and seldom missed functions organized by SBM. Lately, he stopped coming to SBM and instead joined the activities arranged by MAB.

One week-end, he failed to turn up and was greatly missed by his close friends. Two days later, it was discovered that he had died in his sleep much earlier on.

Those persons are well-known to me in my younger days. What I am trying to convey to SBM is that if we have a service that caters for the needs of this group of members, it would certainly go a long way in alleviating their difficulties.

In the case of Maniam, for example, a “caring and sharing” service through daily telephone calls would be of great help to him. Such a voluntary service is available in the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries.

This is because they have a large population of ageing blind people who live on their own. Someone will, therefore, keep a tab on them by phone at least once a day, depending on the client’s situation.

4. The Info Service

On October 25 2014, the Google Digest reported that an internet radio station for the blind had been started in Berkshire of New England, U.S.A. It operates for 365 days a year, giving useful information, recorded news and articles of human interest as well as entertainment. It is manned by a pool of volunteers with only one paid staff.

I believe it is not difficult for SBM to start its own internet radio station. After all, SBM has already been doing this occasionally. Let us plan and improve on the contents of the programme.

5. Voice of the Blind

I strongly advocate that we should maintain our status quo as the Voice of the Blind. In fact, one of the goals of SBM (as enshrined in our constitution) is to uphold our rights, which is the very core of our existence. We must continually press forward concerning issues that affect the blind generally. Negotiation and diplomacy are the best options rather than confronting the authorities through road demos. It is important for us to maintain close rapport with the policy-makers. Three issues that are close to my heart which must be tackled urgently are as follows:

5.1 Employment for the Blind in the Public Sector

Although 1% of jobs has been reserved for the OKU, how much of it has benefited the blind? Do we get special attention during the preliminary process of selecting candidates?

I know for sure that SPA has recently introduced the pre-interview process through on-line for the aptitude tests. However, with more than 50,000 persons trying their luck in penetrating the servers of SPA and causing the non-stop jamming with the heavy traffic, does even a competent blind candidate stand a chance?

What can be done about this?

5.2 Employment for the Blind in the Private Sector

Here, the chances are even slimmer. The corporations prefer foreign workers to the locals. Today, therefore, we can hardly hear of a blind person being taken in by a private company. This is the reality and something should be done soon enough. Our main drawback, however, is that some blind people are unwilling to change their habit of earning a living.

5.3 Employment Incentive Allowance

Another important issue that has cropped up is the question of the Elaun Pekerja Cacat (EPC). In order to strengthen our argument, I would like to put forward a few points for consideration.

Presently, the monthly income eligibility for the EPC is RM1,200 and below. Given the high cost of living today, the income eligibility level should be raised to reflect this reality.

Persons holding the OKU card should be automatically entitled to the allowance regardless of their economic position.

The very basic Braille equipment is so expensive nowadays, let alone the cost of reading materials.-

Moreover, blind people may require sighted helpers to go from place to place but the transport charges are so high.

Blind persons pursuing tertiary education have to engage someone to help in reading print materials.

A high percentage of blind persons are self-employed – no work, no money.

The cost of daily necessities such as fuel, electricity and food-stuffs is high.

The condition could be more acute if they have a big family to support.

Old age comes with sickness.

5.4 Compare the Life of a Fisherman

Usually, the fishermen are not physically disabled. As long as one belongs to the Fishermen's Association, he is eligible to receive the fisherman's assistance aid of RM200 monthly regardless of his economic status. In 2015 the allowance has been raised to RM300.

In addition, the fisherman enjoys Group Insurance, a fuel subsidy, an incentive payment of 10 sen per kg of fish landed at the LKIM jetties, and they are encouraged not to sell their catches to the middlemen, thereby being rewarded with higher returns.

The Pasar Tani has been created partly to benefit the fishermen. They are eligible to apply for the bank loan of RM10,000 without a guarantor. They are given financial assistance to repair their dwelling houses. The family members can attend to business activities while the men are out fishing.

In fact, they have many down-stream activities such as making of prawn paste or belachan, salting fish, making keropok, repairing of boats, selling fishing nets, and so on.

Indeed, the allowances given can serve as the buffer-zone for the fishermen when they cannot go out fishing during the monsoon season.

What about the blind?

6 Leadership Training

Indeed, the leaders come and go but Society of the Blind in Malaysia (SBM) remains. It is, therefore, essential for SBM to make investments in its leadership training programmes. This is because leaders are not inborn but they are created. I can sense that there are so many aspiring young members who are capable of being leaders with some training.

If you hold a particular post for far too long, I would like to urge you to be magnanimous enough to relinquish it as has been shown by our past presidents, namely Ivan Ho, John Kim, Mohd Amin and Dato' Mah Hassan while they still enjoyed popular support.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest the following:

Compile all the feedback from this convention and send it as our collective resolutions to the appropriate authorities, including the YAB Dato' Seri Mohd. Najib, Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Follow up from time to time and call for a dialogue.

To all my friends out there, let us join hands together by offering whatever we can to make SBM great, caring and respectable.

Good luck and thank you.

THE PASSION FOR PIANO

By Ruth Yong Wang Theen

Editor's note: Ruth Yong Wang Theen is totally blind and she has completed her first year at the Monash University in Kuala Lumpur. In fact, she is the first totally blind person to study in that university in this country.

However, realizing that “All work and no play would make a dull girl”, Ruth also pursues her passion for the piano. She would like to share her passion with readers.

To my mind, playing the piano is a gift from God. This talent, therefore, must be developed by putting it into constant practice.

I started learning the piano when I was eleven years old. At the time, I found learning music to be really difficult. However, because of my interest in music, I did not want to give up learning the piano and I was determined to try my best in overcoming the challenges that I faced.

I started learning from the beginner's grade. First, I learned how to play children's songs and Christian worship songs. Then, in order to strengthen my fingers, my teacher gave me exercises to do on the scales and arpeggios. It is vital to master these skills before one can learn to play piano pieces competently. Once I had mastered these skills, I was able to play the songs with a faster rhythm and beat and this enabled me to entertain my listeners.

I then went on to Grade One in which I learned to play three examination pieces. Although I found them to be quite simple and easy to master, I was gripped with nervousness and fear as I sat for the examination for the first time.

As the years passed, I gradually developed my confidence in playing the piano. Year by year, I would go up to the next grade and then sit for the relevant examination. There were times when I suddenly forgot the fingering for the scales. Fortunately, the examiner was very kind and showed me leniency.

For every examination, there would always be three pieces that have to be played. The pieces get more difficult as one proceeds to the next grade. The examination pieces included music from the baroque period of the 17th century, classical period of the 18th century, romantic period of the 19th century and the modern period of the 20th century. The classical pieces in particular had very special appeal for me. I found the classical pieces to be very soothing and calming to the mind. However, I also enjoyed playing pop songs as I found them to be quite entertaining and they could put me into a relaxing mood.

Thus, playing the piano became a favourite hobby of mine. I would put my full heart and soul into learning the piano no matter how challenging it was. At times I would get quite impatient when I made mistakes. Gradually, however, I learned to be more positive to exercise patience with myself.

When I forgot certain chords or melodies during the examination, I would pray to the Lord Jesus to grant me confidence and strength and I felt God's assurance that everything would be well. I believed that through prayer miracles can work; hence, because I prayed, I was able to obtain distinction for every Grade of examination.

I took my piano lessons from the Trinity School; thus, the invigilator and examiner for every Grade came from England. Indeed, I felt complete satisfaction when I was awarded the certificates from Grades Six to Eight. I was filled with joy knowing that I had achieved my goal for each level.



Ruth awarded the 8th Grade Certificate

My first public performance was at the Kuching State Library and I really felt very nervous. At the same time, I was filled with joy and amusement because I was able to inspire others and waken their interest in learning to play music.



Public performance at the Kuching State Library

When I was in Form Five, my heart was filled with gratitude when I was given the opportunity to serve the church during the youth fellowship for a period of six months. I felt very happy to have a talent that I could use and share with other people.

Truly, playing the piano has become my life-long passion as it helps to give meaning and fulfilment in my life. Because of this, I would like to urge and encourage those who have musical talents not to leave their talents lying on the shelf. They must develop their talents by learning to play the piano or some other musical instrument. You will surely experience joy and fulfilment for yourself and at the same time bring cheer and happiness to other people

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE: MORE ON ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES FOR THE BLIND

*By Moses Choo Siew Cheong,
Executive Director,*

National Council for the Blind, Malaysia

In my last article, I have touched on the Blaze ET and the Blaze EZ. Yet more assistive technologies are on the way which can help the blind to live independent lives. One of these latest adaptive devices is the Smart Beetle.



The Smart Beetle can easily fit into your palm. Its small size, i.e. a pocket-sized power pack, could suit your budget and your life-style.

The Smart Beetle is a 14-cell Braille Display that brings the world to your finger-tips. Indeed, it is the lightest and most portable Braille Display available. This ultra-portable Braille Display has five simultaneous Bluetooth connections. You can take it with you to school, to work or on vacation as it provides you with reliable and discrete access to all of your mobile devices and personal computer systems.

You can save time and spare yourself from frustration by pairing up with five Bluetooth connections and one USB connection to your Smart Beetle simultaneously. You can get connected to your phone, tablet, work computer, home computer and much more without necessitating further pairing or re-pairing with your Bluetooth devices.

Compatibility with Popular Screen-Readers

The Smart Beetle will connect as a Braille terminal with screen readers, including JAWS, Window-Eyes, Super Nova, System Access, VoiceOver for Mac and IOS, Braille Back for Android, Mobile Speak, and Talks. By using Braille and speech together, more options become available for you to navigate the various document types and formats.

Revolutionary Bluetooth Keyboard

You can use the Smart Beetle's Perkins-style keyboard to simulate all the functions of a QWERTY keyboard. This helps to eliminate the problems of translation with mobile devices and in getting rid of the sluggishness experienced with other Braille Displays and mobile devices.

Long-lasting Battery and Helpful Audio Prompts

You can stay connected via Bluetooth for up to 24 hours without needing to recharge. You can have even longer run-time by being connected via USB and enjoy all the great features of the Smart Beetle while simultaneously charging the unit. Convenient audio prompts let you know when the Smart Beetle power is on, they keep you informed of the status of Bluetooth connections, and much more.

Here are the specifications of the Smart Beetle:

1. Model B14K
2. Braille Display: Fourteen cells.
3. Keyboard Type: Perkins-Style.
4. Controls:

Two scroll keys, four function keys.

5. Connectivity :
Six simultaneous connections, i.e. five Bluetooth connections and one USB connection.

6. Interface:
USB and Bluetooth.
7. Audio Alerts:
Power on/off, Bluetooth connection/disconnection, etc.
8. Compatibility:
JAWS, Window-Eyes, SuperNova, System Access, NVDA, COBRA, VoiceOver for Mac and iOS, Braille Back for Android.
9. Battery:
Average 24-hour battery life, four-hour recharge time via USB connected to the PC, LED indicator for battery status.
10. Size:
5.86 x 3.38 x 1.06 inches.
11. Weight:
0.617 lbs.
12. Warranty:
Two years for limited parts and labour warranty.

THE PARADOX OF OIL PRICES

By Dr. Gordon Tan Tok Shiong

Editor's note: Dr. Gordon Tan Tok Shiong has been vision-impaired from a young age and he is one of the education achievers among the blind. He obtained his PhD. in Economics from Universiti Malaya and was a lecturer in Economics for about 15 to 20 years in the university.

Since retirement, he loves to spend his time observing how the blind in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur live and work. In fact, he has produced a number of articles on his observations for "NCBM Outreach".

This time, however, he would like to share his ideas on the topic, "The Paradox of Oil Prices". Here is what he says:

When oil prices rise, energy becomes more expensive and so the prices of goods and services also increase. Then when oil prices come down, energy becomes cheaper. Surprisingly, however, there is a niche and the prices of goods and services still continue to go up. Why is this so?

I would like to analyse this paradox and attempt to explain as to why when crude petroleum (or oil) prices increase, the prices of goods and services also increase; but when the crude petroleum prices fall, the prices of goods and services continue to increase.

Crude petroleum is actually a fossil fuel which was formed many millions of years ago from the remains of living organisms such as zooplankton and algae. This petroleum is found under the sedimentary rocks and it is this substance which is extracted from the rocks. It is then channelled to the refineries where it is processed into the various kinds of fuel such as diesel, petrol, kerosene and such other products as asphalt.

The invention of machines and engines and their widespread use throughout the world has given rise to our present industrial age. With industrialisation, the economic pie has been enlarged. This is because the desert lands can be converted into fertile farms with water pumped from the distant rivers, goods can be manufactured in large quantities through mechanisation, the surplus

output from one area can be easily transported to adjacent areas by using engine-powered vehicles, and so on. Nevertheless, our expanded economic pie is heavily dependent upon the steady supply of cheap petroleum.

From 2003 until the middle of 2014, the price of crude petroleum has for various reasons been steadily increasing and frequently even surpassing US\$100 per barrel. In fact, the real price of oil (even after adjustment to the effects of inflation in the year 2013) was triple that of its price in the year 2003.

During this period, the Government in Malaysia had to adjust the retail prices of petrol and diesel time after time in order to limit its total fuel subsidy.

For example, the price of Ron95 was increased by five sen per litre (or from RM1.75 to RM1.80) on September 1, 2009. It was again increased by five sen to RM1.85 on July 16, 2010. Then, in less than five months, the price was again increased by another five sen to RM1.90 on December 4, 2010.

There was an outcry from the public when there was a hike in the price of Ron95 with a 20 sen rise to RM2.10 on September 3, 2013. The Government explained that it was, in fact, still subsidising the oil at 63 sen per litre.

There was another major outcry from the public with yet another price hike of 20 sen to RM2.30 per litre on October 1, 2014. And yet, the Subsidy from the Government still remained at the shattering sum of RM20 billion that year.

The immediate effect of the increase in fuel prices was on the transport sector, especially the car users. Many of the urban dwellers depend on their cars in order to commute daily to and from work. The transport providers are inclined to pass on the increase of prices to their customers, thereby raising up bus fares and transport charges.

Many cities in the country are dependent on the Cameron Highlands for their supply of vegetables; the cost of transport constitutes a large portion of the price. The rise in the price of diesel, therefore, resulted in a parallel increase in the price of food and vegetables.

In addition, the increase in the price of petroleum will also result in the increase of electricity tariffs; this is in view of the fact that electricity in the country is generally based mainly on coal and natural gas and their prices are closely co-related with the petroleum prices. Thus, from 2010 to 2014, the electricity tariff had been increased by an average of about 26 %.

Hence, the stable and high petroleum prices for more than a decade had encouraged the oil-extracting companies to invest billions of dollars in previously uneconomical tar, sand and shale fracking projects, thereby greatly boosting the supply of oil.

Consequently, the price of oil standing at US\$115 per barrel started dropping between June 2014 and January 2015 to below US\$50 per barrel. As the price of crude petroleum fell, the price of petrol in Malaysia was also adjusted downward, thereby making energy cheaper. However, did the prices of goods and services fall as well?

Actually, Malaysia is a producer of crude petroleum and natural gas. Thus, the income from oil and gas forms a large part of Government revenue. For instance, in 2013 the income from oil and gas was RM65 billion, thereby constituting 30% of the total Government revenue.

According to estimates, the Government will lose RM650 million in revenue for every US\$1 drop in the price of oil in annual average terms. Thus, if the annual average price drops by US\$50, the Government revenue from petroleum will be reduced by half.

The weakening of the Government's financial position due to low oil prices resulted in the weakening of the Ringgit. This further resulted in the exchange rate of the Malaysian currency falling from RM3.18 per U.S. Dollar in July 2014 to RM3.68 per U.S. Dollar in March 2015, i.e. a depreciation of nearly 16 %.

The depreciation of the Ringgit had an immediate upward effect on consumer prices. This is because Malaysia is highly dependent on imports to meet its domestic consumption needs. The import of food and beverages was US\$15 billion in the year 2013. There is bound to be a similar, though not

so immediate effect, on the prices of capital and semi-durable goods. The depreciation also caused locally produced goods to increase in price because they are dependent on the import of raw materials.

On April 1 2015, consumers in Malaysia had to pay 6% more on most items with the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in order to boost Government revenue. The new tax coupled with the weaker Ringgit resulted in the expected inflation for the year 2015 to be double that of the average inflation over the past six years.

Hence, both the increase and decrease in oil prices have an inflationary effect upon our economy. Therefore, before apportioning any blame, we should consider the fact that consumer prices are generally quite elastic upwards but they are rather sticky downwards.

Just think of this – when times are good, your landlady will want to increase the rental of your apartment and your workers will demand for higher wages. When times are bad, however, will your landlady voluntarily reduce your rental or will your workers voluntarily accept low wages? Of course, the answer is almost certainly no.

Ultimately, therefore, it is our own behaviour that is the main cause for the paradoxical effects of the oil prices.

A POINT TO PONDER: SUCCESS IS SOMETHING NEAREST TO YOU

By Wong Kow

Here is a question for you to test your response. Before you look at the answer given below, try and see what would be your own answer to the given question.

Here it is – if the library is suddenly on fire, which books are you going to save as you run out for safety?

Now what is your response – take a few moments to think before you go for the answer.

All right, now here is the answer: The books nearest to you.

Food for reflection – before you read the above answer, you would probably have thought of so many books to be saved such as the dictionaries, the encyclopaedia and undoubtedly many other books that are of interest to you.

Indeed, when you are given many options in life, particularly in situations in which you do not really have time to think about them, then you should not forget those things that are within your reach. Truly, very often, success is something that is nearest to you.

Here is another anecdote for you to think about. The anecdote is entitled “The Magic Lamp”.

There were four persons who happened to find the magic lamp at the same time. The genie from the magic lamp said, “I can grant wishes for only one person who is not greedy but he must state his wishes in just one sentence.”

Andrew answered, “I wish that all my family members and friends will be safe and sound for 365 days all year round.”

Bobby said, “I wish that all my family members and friends are safe and sound yesterday, today and tomorrow.”

Charles replied, “I wish that all my family members and friends will be safe and sound today and tomorrow.”

Denny said, “I wish that all my family members and friends will be safe and sound for only one day – everyday.”

Can you guess what was the outcome? It was Denny who had his wishes granted.

Here is the food for reflection: We may be greedy and wish to acquire as much as possible in life. Sometimes, however, it is in the key word or the right attitude that will enable us to reach our desired goal.

Don’t you agree?

STATEMENT OF THE 4TH ASEAN DISABILITY FORUM, MYANMAR 2014

At the 2014 ASEAN Disability Forum, December 17-18, hosted by Yangon, Myanmar, the Statement of the 4th ASEAN Disability Forum was drawn up as follows:

We, the participants at the Regional Conference on Raising Awareness (17-18th December 2014) convened by the 4th ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF), a platform of engagement for the DPO's and Multi-Stakeholders to promote and implement the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities, in Yangon, Myanmar, organised by the Myanmar Independent Living Initiative (MILI), Myanmar Disabled Women Affairs Association (MDWAA), Myanmar National Association for the blind (MNAB), Myanmar Deaf Community Development Association (MDCDA), Myanmar Council of Persons with Disability (MCPD), Future Star Self-Advocacy and ID Group, and the Handicap International Myanmar in collaboration with the ADF Secretariat in Jakarta do hereby record our appreciation of the commitment of the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in:

I. Ensuring the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;

II. Following up on the establishment of the ASEAN Community by 2015 which is made up of the three pillars, namely the Political Security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-Cultural Community as laid down in the Siam Reap Declaration (2012);

III. Referring and Supporting the UNESCAP InCheon Strategy to "Make the Right Real" in the new Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013-2022).

We further express heartfelt gratitude to the ASEAN member-states for the successful development of the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013-2022) and do hereby agree to declare as follows:

1. *The ASEAN member-states:*

1.1 to encourage all ASEAN Member-States to ratify and to apply the United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities;

1.2 to support ASEAN Member-States in conducting the Rights-Based approaching in decision-making with regards to all matters affecting Persons with Disabilities based on the UN-CRPD Principles;

1.3 to recommend that ASEAN Member-States continue creating a sustainable system for Persons with Disabilities to be gainfully employed in respect of the norms and the needs of Persons with Disabilities for inclusion, independent living and dignity.

1.4 to ensure that the ASEAN Member-States promote inclusive public services by providing accessibility to the built environment, transportation, information and communication;

1.5 to study, share and adapt best practices in the policy sectors of other ASEAN Member-States and to uphold the protection and promotion of disability rights;

1.6 to enhance the creative support system for social protection on disability issues by raising social welfare to social protection, thereby promoting sustainability development.

1.7. to accelerate awareness-raising activities in close partnership with all the stake-holders, including the mass media.

2 *The ASEAN Secretariat*

2.1 to urge the ASEAN secretariat to work closely with ADF in activating the technical support mechanism on advocating disability issues in ASEAN and to include ADF on the ASEAN Committee as disability is a cross-cutting issue and ADF is an expert on disability;

2.2 to urge ASEAN donors in promoting the psychological disability movement and in enabling the various severe disability types to raise their voice;

2.3 to encourage the prioritising of disability issues in policy formulation, thereby enabling Persons with Disabilities to enjoy their rights by fully participating in the life of the ASEAN Region.

3 *The ASEAN Disability Forum*

3.1 To ensure that the priority agenda of the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities is adopted as the National Strategic Plan in the ASEAN Member-States;

3.2 to advocate for the inclusion of disability issues and activities, provision of accessible facilities and information, and full participation of Persons with Disabilities in various programmes in the ASEAN Region e.g. the ASEAN Games).

4 *The Individual ASEAN Member-Countries*

4.1 to adopt the policy on the intellectual disability system with regards to education, health, the law of protection and public services (particularly in Vietnam);

4.2 to introduce an effective inclusive education system by carrying out research on the many barriers to receiving quality education by persons with disabilities (particularly in Myanmar);

4.3 to review and develop the national policies and domestic legislation based on the CRPD (particularly in Laos);

4.4 to initiate a long-term programme to include Persons with Disabilities in economic development by promoting effective employment opportunities, self-employment and entrepreneurship and to expand

the coverage of government services for Persons with Disabilities (particularly in Thailand);

4.5 to promote the participation of persons with Disabilities in the youth and women's movements in the ASEAN Region;

4.6 to urge the establishment of new laws and monitoring of their effective implementation on the basis of CRPD in every country (particularly in Indonesia);

4.7 to enact the disability rights laws by the Government (particularly in Myanmar);

4.8 to ensure inclusion of the disabled in the general elections (particularly in Myanmar).

We, therefore, respectfully submit these recommendations and request the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to disseminate this document to the ASEAN Member-States.

We, the disabled peoples, Organisations in ASEAN, further encourage the DPO's in Malaysia and the ADF Secretariat to organise the ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF) in 2015.

The ASEAN Disability Forum expresses its utmost gratitude for the successful implementation of the 4th ADF Forum in Myanmar.

THE 11TH MALAYSIA PLAN - HOW IT AFFECTS YOU

It is very heartening to note that the 11th Malaysia Plan has included considerations for the disabled and for senior citizens.

For Persons with disability, they include:

1. It is targeted to have the disabled constitute at least 1% of the Civil Servants in the public sector.
2. Measures will be taken to strengthen the enforcement of the building By-laws for universal access (1984) in order to ensure the compliance with universal design, thereby creating a disabled-friendly physical environment.
3. Community-based independent living centres will be established with the participation of Non-Governmental Organisations.
4. More accessibility to business education and trading skills will be provided in order to develop and promote entrepreneurship among the disabled.

For the senior citizens, the considerations are:

1. Providing elderly-friendly infrastructure and care services.
2. Establishing more day-care centres for the elderly to enable them to live with their working family members.
3. Launching a national campaign in order to promote social awareness on volunteerism in order to encourage the elderly to participate in community-based activities.
4. Enhancing the capacity of the Institute of Technology in University Putra Malaysia to conduct more research to support active ageing

SOME FRIENDLY TIPS

Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore:

Always honour your friendship with people, never forget your friends, the people who helped you when you were down. Never forget that.

C.S. Lewis:

You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.

Mike Mc'hargne:

People grow when they are loved well. If you want to help others heal, love them without an agenda.

Unknown:

Help people, even when you know they can't help you back.

Unknown:

The strongest people make time to help others even if they are struggling with their own problems.

Unknown:

The greatest lesson I have learnt is that I still have a lot to learn.

Thema Davis:

Have the maturity to know that sometimes silence is more powerful than having the last word.

Unknown:

Even though I have no idea what tomorrow will bring, I'm still going to think positive and hope for the best.

Unknown:

Don't allow something that someone said to discourage you. Instead, use it as a motivator to keep going.

Unknown:

Just because a person smiles all the time doesn't mean that their life is perfect. That smile is the symbol of hope and strength.

Humorous Tidbits

Letter from a Teacher to a Parent:

Dear Parent,

Kamal doesn't smell nice in class. Please try to bathe him.

Parent's answer:

Dear Teacher,

Kamal is not a rose. Don't smell him - teach him!

Giving Attention:

Mother to son - who is Iskandar Zulkarnain?

Son - don't know.

Mother - sometimes give attention to your studies also.

Son to mother - do you know auntie Chinky?

Mother - don't know.

Son - sometimes give attention to dad also.

A Cute Excuse:

Teacher - why are you late?

Student - mum and dad were fighting.

Teacher - so what makes you late if they were fighting?

Student - one shoe was in mum's hand and one in dad's.

Beggar:

Wife - I hate that beggar.

Husband - Why?

Wife - rascal, yesterday I gave him food. Today he gave me a book on how to cook.

Drunk:

A husband came home drunk. To avoid his wife scolding him, he took a laptop and started working.

Wife - had alcohol?

Husband - no, no, darling.

Wife - idiot. Then why you open my suitcase and acting like a typist?

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EARN SOME EXTRA CASH

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

1. Original articles on the achievements of blind people or of an inspirational nature (about 500 words) - RM80.00
2. Articles containing ideas and suggestions for the improvement of NCBM or its member-organisations (about 500 words) - RM80.00
3. Articles on funny or unusual experiences (250 - 500 words) - RM40.00 - RM80.00
4. Interesting articles taken from magazines or documents of limited circulation - RM15.00.

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



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