Editorial by Mary Schnackenberg

Welcome to the last issue for 2019 of East Wind. We do not have much news from around the region's WBUAP members. But we do have important news about happenings in our region.

We visit Myanmar first. Then we turn our attention to 4 January, literacy through braille, and the results of the 2019 Onkyo Braille Essay competition. I've already been asked for information about the 2020 competition. As soon as I have the information it will go out in East Wind and up on the WBUAP website. The World Blind Union is running an employment survey and they are seeking participants. And there’s a reminder about the upcoming general assembly in June. There's news about audio description coming to Australian television. And cbm has provided two articles about their work in Papua New Guinea. To conclude we have two articles from the media.

May we take this opportunity to wish everyone a happy and successful 2020.

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The First Blind Forum in Myanmar

Ms. Aye Chan Aung (Alice) writes:

The very first blind forum was held in Myanmar on 12 and 13 July 2019. It was organized by the Myanmar National Association of the Blind (MNAB) with the financial support from the Danish Association of the Blind. Its objectives were to make known the difficulties and challenges faced by the blind in Myanmar to the responsible persons and look for solutions in cooperation with them.

The representatives of different blind groups and blind schools across the country as well as the individual members of MNAB attended the forum. So did the Director General of Social Welfare Department, the Professor of Law Department from Dagon University, the Myanmar Federation of Persons with Disabilities, other disabled people organizations and the media. A total of 170 participants joined the event.

According to the discussions by the participants, the blind in Myanmar have difficulty seeking employment. They are also being exploited in some of the massage rooms.

As for the elderly with blindness, there is no specific care center for them. On the other hand, they are not accepted at the homes for the aged by the government.

There also came the suggestion for the involvement of various departments in the next forum if there were to be one. For instance, the education personnel should be present on the occasion to be able to effectively discuss education-related matters of the blind.

As a result of the first blind forum, there will be drawing up of strategies on future advocacy as well as capacity-building trainings for the blind to improve their education and employment.

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Celebrate World Braille Day on 4 January

Mary Schnackenberg writes:

4 January is the birthday of Louis Braille who was born in 1809. And the United Nations has designated his birthday as World Braille Day.

Those of us who already read and write braille know the difference literacy through braille makes in our own lives. Our teachers have launched us on a journey of lifelong learning through education, employment and inclusion in our communities.

So we need to ask ourselves how we can help share our literacy more widely through our individual and group advocacy. I encourage you to share your experiences with East Wind readers. Are there any special events that have taken place in your country that you can tell us about? I look forward to hearing about any special braille events in time for our next issue which will go out in March. Dates for 2020 issues of East Wind are at the end of this newsletter.

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Results of the 17th Onkyo World Braille Essay Contest 2019

Ivan Ho Tuck Choy writes:

The WBUAP Onkyo Selection Committee (WOSC), comprising Hiroaki Ishiwata and Naomi Yuki from Japan, Jordina Howell from Australia, Prof. Kamonwan Inaram from Thailand, Godfrey Ooi and myself as Chairman from Malaysia, met in August to go through the essays received from eight countries - China, Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. Together they submitted 32 entries - 11 essays for Group A and 21 essays for Group B.

As in previous years, the WOSC found it very tough in selecting the seven winners as the essays were of high quality. In fact, some of the entries were just a few marks separating the winners from each other. But you can rest assured that the decisions of the WOSC were arrived at after careful consideration.

In compliance with the terms of the Sponsorship by The Onkyo Corporation of Japan, the results can only be released in November after the Sponsor has received and verified all the results from the participating regions of WBU.

Thank you ever so much for your kind co-operation and patience. And here at last are the results you have been waiting anxiously to hear. For a change, I shall let you have the results starting from the Fine Works prizes upwards.

1. The two Fine Works prizes for Group A of US $200 went to: Werut Bulbon, 16-year old male student from Thailand; and Luong Thi Tra My, 17-year old female from Vietnam.

2. The two Fine Works prizes for Group B of US $300 were awarded to: Kim Jongsim, 53-year old female from South Korea; and Ma Khaung Bram Nan, 50-year old male from Myanmar.
3. The Excellence Prize for Group A of US $500 went to: Zhao Houren, 15-year old male from China.

4. The Excellence Prize for Group B, also carrying $500, went to: Ma Gaoliang, 55-year old male from China.

5. The Otsuki Prize of $1,000 went to: Kong Hwei Zhen, 25-year old female lawyer from Malaysia. The prize was awarded to her for the following reasons:

   (a) Her description of taking the road less travelled by the blind and vision-impaired to explore life's opportunities, overcome barriers and embrace reality, shines forth with passion and enthusiasm.

   (b) Her perseverance and determination in undertaking the journey, full of twisting and turning challenges, are most admirable.

   (c) Her resourcefulness and collaborative efforts with other people and organisations in contributing towards the development and well-being of society, are very inspiring.

As Chairman of WOSC, I extend hearty congratulations to the seven winners, and my deep appreciation to all who have participated but did not get a prize. Do not be disheartened, but do try again next year.

I take this opportunity to thank the eight countries for forming the National Onkyo Selection Committees NOSC’s, for encouraging participation in the Contest, and for putting in so much effort in translating the essays from the local languages into English. Please do continue to give your support to this longest-running activity of WBUAP so that Mr. Naoto Otsuki, the Honorary Chairman of The Onkyo Corporation who initiated the Onkyo Braille Essay Contest back in 2003, will be kept inspired to continue sponsoring this very beneficial and worthy project.

On behalf of WBUAP, I convey my deep gratitude to the Management of The Onkyo Corporation for their technical support and for their generosity in funding this Contest with the goal of promoting Braille literacy in the WBUAP and other regions of WBU.

Finally, but not the least, my sincere thanks go to Michiko Tabata and Members of her team for putting their trust in me to implement the project on behalf of Wbuap.

With best wishes
Ivan Ho Tuck Choy,
Chairman,
The WBUAP Onkyo Selection Committee 2019.

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World Blind Union Employment Survey 2019

Dr. Karen Wolffe writes:

Greetings from the World Blind Union (WBU) Employment Committee.

We have developed a short survey designed to identify employment patterns of people who are blind or partially sighted and of working-age throughout the world. We were fortunate to be able to review the work of our colleagues at the Canadian
National Institute of the Blind (CNIB), Vision Australia (VA), and the New Zealand Foundation of the Blind (NZFB), who deployed a similar survey in their respective countries and shared their survey with us, which helped us considerably.

The survey we designed for the WBU membership can be completed in 20-25 minutes and it is available in English, French, and Spanish. If you need another language, you may need to use a tool like Google Translate or work with local translators to assist you with translating the survey. Unfortunately, WBU does not have the capacity to translate into additional languages and we apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

We need you to distribute the WBU Employment Survey in your region at your earliest convenience, so that we can report the results at the 2020 WBU/ICEVI General Assemblies in Madrid.

The WBU Employment Survey is a four-part survey, which uses skip logic to move respondents through the survey questions so that they only answer questions that pertain to them. Section One (demographics) is completed by all respondents. Section Two (current job) is completed by currently employed respondents only. Section Three (previously employed, but not working currently) is completed only by the respondents who have work experience but are not working presently. Section Four (never worked) is completed only by the respondents who have no work experience.

We are using Survey Monkey, which is accessible with both screen readers and screen magnification as an online tool for survey completion. Respondents may use the link pasted below to access the WBU Employment Survey as often as necessary to complete the survey until they choose "done" - IF respondents are at the same computer each time they return to the survey.

The Survey Monkey link is: https://www.surveymonkey.ca/r/8ZP2KW3

We need your assistance to disseminate the WBU Employment Survey. If your constituents don't have Internet access, please reach out to a WBU national member, who may be able to help with data entry or survey deployment. Or, you may want to request assistance from a local teacher or service provider in your community who may be able to help you enter your constituents’ data. If you cannot get the assistance you need to deploy the survey using the online tool, please reach out to me (Dr. Karen Wolffe) and I will help you in any way that I can to capture information from your constituents.

Thank you for your interest in the work of WBU and your support to us as we gather this important information about employment of blind and partially sighted people throughout the world.

Sincerely,
Dr. Karen Wolffe
WBU Employment Committee Member
karenwolffe@gmail.com

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World Blind Union General Assembly Next June

Mary Schnackenberg writes:

The 2020 WBU-ICEVI Assemblies will be held in Madrid, Spain, next June. ONCE is hosting the event. WBU expects more than 1,000 delegates will attend.

Please register by 15 April 2020. Read all about the assemblies at this link: https://www.worldblindnesssummit.com/en.

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Audio Description on Australian TV

Media Release from Blind Citizens Australia

Christmas Comes Early for Television Viewers Who Are Blind or Vision Impaired

Australians who are blind or vision impaired are celebrating today [16 December 2019] following an announcement by the Hon Paul Fletcher MP, Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts that funding will be made available to Australia's public broadcasters to implement Audio Description (AD).

AD is a verbal narration which describes scenery, costumes and other visual elements to make television accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired. It is available on some streaming services; however, Australia is the only English speaking OECD country not currently offering AD on free-to-air television.

Emma Bennison, CEO of Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), the national representative organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired, congratulated the Government on behalf of the blindness sector for recognising that provision of AD is long overdue.

“This is a fantastic step forward for Australians who are blind or vision impaired. BCA has been campaigning for AD since 1996 and more recently, organisations across the blindness sector have joined with us to highlight the human right of people who are blind or vision impaired to watch television with family and friends,” she said.

“We welcome the provision of $2 million to both the ABC and SBS to implement AD. We are scheduled to meet with the ABC early in the new year and look forward to working closely with them on the implementation of AD by July 2020. We also congratulate SBS on demonstrating their commitment to AD by broadcasting a recent series profiling artists with disability, Perspective Shift via their OnDemand service with the AD available concurrently to the free to air timetable. We look forward to working with them on their implementation also.”

It is important to note that people who are blind or vision impaired are keen to receive reassurance from the ABC and SBS that AD will be a permanent fixture, given there has already been several trials of the service. BCA also looks forward to AD being enshrined in legislation, in the same way that captioning is for Australians who are Deaf or hearing impaired.
Work in Papua New Guinea

Editor's note:

Our thanks to Martine Abel-Williamson for connecting us with the cbm New Zealand office who has provided this fascinating insight into their work in Papua New Guinea.

Cataract Outreach Clinics in PNG

cbm recently organised a week-long surgical outreach clinic in Mingende, a small town located in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, performing cataract operations. The cbm team overcame some challenges during the week: difficult road access, frequent power cuts and a 7.2 earthquake shook the area! Luckily there was no significant damage and the surgeries could continue, with the surgical team working long hours to see as many clients as they could. Remarkably, by the end of the week, all 144 people had been seen, and a staggering 98 surgeries were completed, transforming people's lives overnight.

The people arrived from remote villages, walking many hours barefoot, usually guided by family members. They used their savings to make this difficult and hazardous journey, along muddy walking trails, crossing rivers and streams that often have no bridge, but pursuing the journey feeling it was their only opportunity to have their vision restored.

Access to specialised medical services like eye doctors (ophthalmologists) is minimal with just 14 ophthalmologists practicing in the entire country, so many people in the highlands have never seen a doctor. For a nation with a population of 8.2 million, this is far below the 72 required to meet the recommended ratios. The vast majority of people live in rural areas, but most health services and specialists practice in larger towns, leaving the rural majority significantly under served.

This results in people being deeply affected by avoidable disabilities that are easy and relatively cost-effective to treat. Cataracts are a great example; in developed countries it would be unthinkable for someone to suffer blindness from advanced cataracts, but for many people in PNG this is a sad reality.

Disability such as blindness, is often met with suspicion in PNG. Those who are blind can be stigmatised and isolation is commonplace. Poor infrastructure in rural areas exacerbates this isolation as it makes moving around difficult and dangerous. People who are blind often remain at home, unable to socialise or work, becoming entirely dependent on the support of their family which can have a devastating effect on their physical and mental health.

To reduce the prevalence of avoidable blindness, and address the difficulties that rural populations face accessing specialist services, cbm has developed a comprehensive and sustainable programme. Over the last 20 years, cbm has worked in partnership with Inclusive Education Resource Centres (IERC) throughout PNG. IERC staff have incredible community networks and can reach extremely difficult to access communities. They travel great distances, often on foot, in search
of people with disabilities. Through their established relationship within the community, they conduct screening clinics for visual impairment and other disabilities, raising awareness of cataracts. They bring the good news that cataracts are operable and reversible, then refer people to cbm surgical outreach clinics like the one in Mingende.

cbm fund an eye surgeon and nurses to travel to small rural hospitals, bringing specialised equipment that is needed to set up a temporary surgical unit, allowing them to perform cataract surgery in difficult areas, at a very low cost. Recognising the shortage of trained ophthalmologists and the long-term investment required to address the need, cbm has contributed to eye surgery training to PNG doctors through a partnership with the University of Papua New Guinea School of Medicine. During the recent clinic in Mingende, specialising doctors gained valuable surgical experience in the supportive environment.

After surgery is completed, the IERC staff follow up post-operative community care with each person to reduce complications and improve the outcomes. This also allows the IERC workers to link clients (and other people with disabilities in the village) to medical, educational, and/or social services as needed. The partnership between cbm and the IERC staff is vital. cbm seconded ophthalmologist Dr Wabulembo , acknowledges that the programme “is providing resources and bringing experienced personnel to places where the clients actually are, and this is critical.” Without the ongoing partnership with the IERC, it would be challenging for cbm to reach those needing specialist eye services in the rural highlands. cbm Country Coordinator in PNG remarks “the logistics required to organise a cataract outreach clinic require strong and trusted partnerships and networks with local communities. Links that cbm has established in PNG over the last 40 years.”

cbm and partners are some of the only organisations that are active and delivering these life-changing services in the highlands. Without cataract outreach clinics, hundreds of people each year would remain untreated and deeply affected by avoidable blindness. Dr Wabulembo describes the week-long clinic, “the joy among the clients and their families that comes with the restoration of sight after cataract surgery motivates me. I feel privileged to be part of a team that is making such a remarkable difference to people's lives”.

Every time cbm runs a clinic in the highlands, it is has an immensely positive impact on many people's lives. Restoring one’s sight also restores their independence and dignity. It is a new beginning, a second life. Jack, a 25-year-old man who was rushing out of the clinic to go home and see his son for the first time, described it perfectly “having my vision restored is the greatest gift I could ever receive”.

**Celebrating World Sight Day in PNG**

This year, cbm New Zealand took the opportunity to celebrate World Sight Day and promote eye health with the community of Goroka, a town in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Over the last 20 years cbm has been very active in this region, developing quality eye care services for the rural poor through the Goroka Eye Clinic which has a reputation as one of the best-resourced and highly effective eye services in PNG, with top of the line equipment and expert staff. For this special occasion, cbm New Zealand CEO Murray Sheard visited Goroka to celebrate the impact cbm field partners are having and to raise awareness about eye health among the communities.
On this special day, cbm’s team at the Goroka eye clinic and the Inclusive Education Resource Centre organised an event at a large park in the centre of town. The team set up marquees to keep the crowds out of the hot midday sun and to provide free vision assessments and eye health education lessons. The day started with a convoy of cars decorated with banners, banana leaves and flowers, driving through the town centre, escorted by the local police with their sirens on to show their support. Music blared and everyone danced and celebrated as they entered the park where a crowd of close to 500 people gathered. Two people who recently had successful cataract surgery and their vision restored gave speeches. They shared about how their life had changed and thanked the clinic staff and cbm for making this possible, and encouraged people with eye conditions to visit the clinic. cbm’s ophthalmologist Dr Wabulembo took the opportunity to disprove some common misconceptions about eye surgery. False beliefs can spread throughout the community and deter some people from going to the clinic to seek help. He also encouraged people with new-borns to visit the clinic for free eye screening and stressed the importance of early intervention for the most positive outcomes for children.

The event finished with a PNG-reggae infused performance from the “Braille Boys”, a four-piece band of students with visual impairment. The members attend Goroka University, where they are supported by the cbm inclusive education resource centre and were a huge hit with the crowd.

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From the Media

Disclaimer

We’re receiving a number of articles about blind and partially sighted people that have appeared in the newspapers, on radio and television in our region. Over the years some of us have found that articles have turned up in the media about us which we ourselves don’t get to read. Thinking about “nothing about us without us” we’re reprinting some media articles below.

In this media section of East Wind, the opinions expressed are not necessarily those of members of the Board and Policy Council or Editorial team of the World Blind Union – Asia Pacific Region. We have not checked the accuracy of the facts in these articles.

Beacons boost city access for people with low vision

New beacons along Bourke and Swanston streets will send audio messages about potential obstacles to users’ phones, to help people with low vision or blindness get around the city.

Chair of the People City portfolio, Councillor Beverley Pinder, said the City of Melbourne had commissioned Guide Dogs Victoria to develop a program, which uses a phone app to provide information about intersections, construction and public transport.

“Accessibility is an important part of everything we do at the City of Melbourne, including helping people find their way around our city,” Cr Pinder said.
“Melbourne is growing – and as our city changes it’s vital that we support people living with low vision, blindness or other disabilities to remain confident and independent getting around.

“We're embracing new ways of communicating with residents and visitors to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to experience everything our wonderful city has to offer.”

The beacons use an existing phone app, BlindSquare, to provide detailed audio messages with information that is not available through other map based tools such as Google Maps. This includes the location of obstacles, such as bollards, and information about construction works in the area.

New virtual GPS beacons have been created at intersections along Bourke and Swanston streets and sections of Flinders Lane and Degraves Street. The technology also uses new physical beacons, installed in prominent locations including Ross House, Melbourne Town Hall, Melbourne Visitor Hub at Town Hall, City Library and the Degraves Street underpass.

The technology uses GPS and bluetooth in the user's phone to access audio messages from nearby beacons. It is designed to be used as an additional tool to complement other mobility aids such as a cane or Guide Dog.

The beacons work with either the paid version of Blindsquare or the free Blindsquare Event phone apps, which are commonly used by people with low vision or blindness to access information about key locations.

The beacon technology has been successfully implemented by Guide Dogs Victoria at all City Loop train stations, Richmond and Footscray railway stations, Melbourne Zoo, District Docklands Shopping Centre, and the recent Grand Prix.

Chair of the International Engagement portfolio, Councillor Philip Le Liu, said messages were available in 25 different languages.

“This is a fantastic tool that will provide invaluable support to people with low vision, whether they are residents who speak a language other than English, or among the almost 3 million international tourists who visit Melbourne each year,” Cr Le Liu said.

The City of Melbourne completed user testing in August this year. People with low vision or blindness provided advice to improve the messages people receive and ensure the information is helpful and relevant.

Further feedback can be provided through the app and will be closely monitored and used to adjust the messaging as needed.

Guide Dogs Victoria CEO Karen Hayes said: “Everyone deserves to enjoy our beautiful city, so it's important that we continue to work as a community to make public spaces, events and experiences more accessible than ever.

“We commend City of Melbourne for their collaboration in further bringing this exciting technology to life across the city, and we look forward to seeing more organisations do the same.”
Blindsquare and Blindsquare Event are available for iPhone through Apple’s App Store.


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Obligation to ensure the digital world is inclusive

Editor’s note:

This article from a New Zealand newspaper argues in favour of web accessibility in a clear straightforward way. Our thanks to Paula Waby for bringing it to our attention.

Jean Balchin looks at the importance of digital accessibility.

What do you think about when you hear the word "accessibility"? Perhaps a lift or ramp springs to mind; braille, or special seats on the bus. Perhaps you think of disabled parking spaces, quiet hours at your local supermarket, or the chairlift that your grandmother uses.

However, you probably don't think of accessibility as you're scrolling through Facebook or uploading your holiday pics to Instagram. But web accessibility is just as important as physical accessibility and is often overlooked when it comes to website design and social media use.

What exactly is web accessibility? In simple terms, web accessibility is the inclusive practice of ensuring that no barriers impede the access of people with disabilities to websites on the World Wide Web. Digital accessibility, to call it by another name, is the practice of designing and creating content which can be used by everyone, regardless of their cognitive ability or motor skills.

Contrary to some popular beliefs and misconceptions, people with disabilities are more than capable of leading full, productive lives. A lot of them do so through the use of assistive technology tools (software and hardware) that help one navigate a website and interact with its content.

These tools include screen magnifiers, screen readers, alternative keyboards, eye tracking tools, and more. But these assistive tools can only work if the websites they are navigating are accessible. Without alternative text or image descriptions for example, a screen-reader cannot provide a user with any useful information about an image.

A steadily increasing amount of legislation around the world requires organisations to follow a unified set of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0). But the importance of digital accessibility goes beyond legal regulations. According to WHO, over a billion people live with some form of disability. The WHO also estimates that hearing loss affects about 360million people, or 5.3% of the world's population, and that 285million across the globe are visually impaired.

For people with vision impairments, colours, and the contrast between colours, on posters and other visuals can matter tremendously, as can the size of text, or the
choice of fonts. For people who are blind, image descriptions, alt tags, title tags, and audio descriptions for video content can mean the difference between “getting” the joke or not; between understanding the full message, or being left out in the dark, for the want of a better phrase.

For those with hearing impairments, subtitles or signing on video content is integral to providing a full and comprehensive experience. For people who have difficulty using a keyboard or mouse, auto-completion of forms and the ease with which a user can navigate a webpage is of the utmost importance. For people with dyslexia or other learning difficulties, plain language and instructional diagrams make things much easier to understand.

Most of these accommodations are easy enough, and may be implemented without decreasing the usability of a site for non-disabled people. To be purely pragmatic about it, ensuring one’s website is accessible makes a lot of economic sense, in that ignoring the various disabled communities means overlooking millions of potential customers, clients, or fans.

Moreover, web accessibility can benefit everyone, including people with a slow internet connection, older people with changing abilities due to ageing, people using devices with small screens, and people with temporary disabilities such as a broken wrist or a misplaced hearing aid.

When setting up a website or putting together a social media campaign, accessibility should be considered from the very start. It takes far more time and effort to fix accessibility issues in existing websites than it does to create a fully accessible site from the offset.

Naturally, this may take more time to begin with, but with practice, the design and implementation of inclusive web content will become second-nature. Finally, it is vitally important to involve people with a range of disabilities at every stage of the design and implementation process.

There are numerous useful tools one can use to ensure one’s website is clear and accessible, including A11Y Compliance Platform by Bureau of Internet Accessibility, the Accessibility Checklist by Elsevier and Accessibility Developer Tools by Google Accessibility.

A simple Google search will pull up a plethora of exciting tools for you to gauge your website’s accessibility. There are also a few quick questions you can ask yourself when publishing something on social media or creating a new page: Is the language clear and easy to understand? Is the content still stable when one uses a screen magnifier? Does it work with a screen reader?

After all, as Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web said, "The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect."

Our world is digitally transforming by the second. We, as social media users and consumers of digital information, have an obligation to ensure that our digital communications are inclusive for all users, regardless of language, location, or ability.
Jean Balchin, a former English student at the University of Otago, is studying at Oxford University after being awarded a Rhodes Scholarship.


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**Upcoming Dates for East Wind**

Here are the dates for the next four issues of East Wind. Please can you put these dates in your diaries so you can get your news to the Editor in good time.

Issue No. 31 is due in March 2020. Please send your news by 29 February.
Issue No. 32 is due in June 2020. Please send your news by 31 May.
Issue No. 33 is due in September 2020. Please send your news by 31 August.
Issue No. 34 is due in December 2020. Please send your news by 30 November.

We may edit submissions due to space limitations. Please send your contributions to Mary's email address: mary@aicomms.co.nz.

You should also check out our website www.wbuap.org. If you go to our home page you can sign up to receive updates from our website direct to your inbox or use our RSS feed.

That concludes this issue of East Wind No. 30, December 2019.