

# East Wind No. 31

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Official Newsletter of the World Blind Union – Asia Pacific (WBUAP)

“The Voice of The Blind and Visually Impaired in The Asia Pacific Region”

Please visit the World Blind Union – Asia Pacific website

[www.wbuap.org](http://www.wbuap.org)

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## Editorial

### Mary Schnackenberg writes:

I doubt anyone of us reading East Wind No. 30 last December could have predicted the worldwide changes we are each now working with. COVID-19 has impacted severely on all blind and low vision individuals and our organisations, as well as our families, friends, colleagues and our countries. No one has not been touched by this pandemic. The media articles I see each day bring mostly grim news. One theme that affects all of us is captured in this headline: "Facing coronavirus while deaf and blind: 'Everything relies on touch'".

Despite the many things that have not worked for us, there are good things that have happened over the last three or four months. Many of them are listed in the E-Bulletin from the World Blind Union that came out at the beginning of this month. The WBU head office has been working with other non-government organisations as well as the United Nations and more to promote our issues. Stories from Mongolia, New Zealand and Thailand draw attention to our region. Advocacy by the Pacific Disability Forum, a pan disability organisation that includes blind people, is also covered.

If you are not on the WBU E-Bulletin circulation list may I please encourage you to drop an email to <mailto:info@wbu.ngo> and ask them to add you to their distribution list.

Turning to this East Wind, I want to thank our contributors again. Many of us have had difficulty contributing to East Wind for this issue. And as your editor I have been late in getting this one out. But again I'm really pleased with our contributors and their articles.

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## See You In May 2021

### Michiko Tabata, WBUAP Regional President writes:

Dear friends around the region,

Without the COVID-19 outbreak, by now we would have been busy getting ready for the assembly in Madrid that was supposed to be coming up in a month's time: writing manuscripts, making sure you have all the travel arrangements, wondering what to bring in your suitcase to Spain, collecting information on food and drinks for delight.

The reality is, everyone is struggling around the world faced with the fear of the widespread but invisible virus and the historic challenges of the economic downturn, which may not be completely over within the period of months.

The disability community around the world, and we, the individuals with disabilities are all facing extra challenges. The outbreak is hitting harder on blind and partially sighted people in vulnerable employment circumstances. The need for social distancing is posing new challenges on caregiving and other welfare services. Collection of information is so crucial in such crisis. But it is hard for us to know where sanitizers and thermometers will be sold the next, and swimming through panic buying is next to impossible for us. Are we ensured easy access to various relief services national and local governments are offering? Etc. etc.

DPOs around the world are collecting all these voices into the basis for their advocacy activities. So we strongly suggest that you follow the work of the World Blind Union and the International Disability Alliance (of which WBU is a core member). There is valuable information on some of the ideas for implementation we may be able to learn from our friends around the world. This is one of such times when having friends around the world as a network means even more, because although there are gradations of impact, virus does not discriminate people and we all share the same challenges.

Humans need hopes for the future. The fact that we will eventually overcome this crisis and join with smiles in May next year will be one of such hopes for the future. At least that is my case, as I so desperately miss the postponed opportunity to see you all in June. We will look forward to the next year when we finally meet in Spain.

Until then, please stay safe, healthy and keep our voices united.

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## **WBU General Assembly Postponed**

As we know, the World Blind Union (WBU), the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), and the Organización Nacional de (ONCE) have postponed the joint WBU and ICEVI general assemblies. The WBU/ICEVI joint general assemblies will now be held from 21 to 26 May 2021 in Madrid. Thanks to the local host, ONCE, the cost for rooms at the Madrid Marriot Auditorium are unchanged. As more information becomes available, it will be sent to WBU, ICEVI and ONCE members and posted on our organizations' websites.

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## **WBUAP Board and Policy Council meeting in February**

The Board and Policy Council of the region had planned to meet in Beijing in February. COVID-19 meant members could not meet face to face. However we did meet by Skype over the internet. For some there were intermittent technical difficulties. However overall the meeting went very well.

We discussed reports from the Treasurer and the Secretary-General. Other reports were about the sub regions, the Employment Committee, the Massage Commission, the Women's network, the Youth Network, the UN Advocacy Network, East Wind and the WBUAP website, the WBU Officers, the Asia Pacific Disability Forum, UNESCAP, the World Braille Council, the Marrakesh Treaty campaign, the Web accessibility campaign and more. As the meeting took place prior to the postponement of the WBU General Assembly there was also discussion about preparations for the General Assembly and the Asia Pacific Regional meeting that takes place during the General Assembly.

All the work of the WBU Asia Pacific region is undertaken by many committed volunteers. We are very grateful for all the effort that our volunteers put in on our behalf, growing the advocacy about and understanding of the issues blind and vision impaired people face across the region.

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## Onkyo World Braille Essay Contest

We're pleased to let you know this is running again in 2020. Although the WBUAP region has its own committee to select winners, each candidate must go through their country's blindness organisations' country committee to enter. There are good cash prizes on offer. So please contact your blindness organisation in your country to find out how to enter.

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## Indonesia has joined the Marrakesh Treaty

**Neil Jarvis writes:**

Indonesia joined the Marrakesh Treaty on 28 January 2020. The treaty came into force in that country on 28 April. So many congratulations to our friends in Indonesia.

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## News from Thailand

### Cloth Embroidery Project, New Career for the Blind

**Thiypaporn Khempila writes,**

The Pakjitpakjai Project is teaching the art of Sachiko cloth embroidery to a growing number of blind people in Thailand. Sachiko is a traditional Japanese style of cloth embroidery. Training is supported by the Thailand Association of the Blind (TAB). At the beginning of the project in June 2018, Pakjitpakjai was taught to six people at the Association of the Blind in Chiang Mai province. It's planned to expand the training throughout the country to become a new career for the blind in Thailand.

This project is considered as a social enterprise which is not only to sell products made by the blind but also increase the potential skills and the value of the products. The products stripe Sachiko embroidery on to cloth with a variety of geometric patterns such as squares, triangles, circles and so on.

In Thailand, there are just a few careers for the blind, such as lottery sellers, singers, or Thai massagers. According to TAB statistics in October 2018, blind people who are in employment are just 20% of the total number of blind people around the country.

The Pakjitpakjai project now has more than 40 blind makers of Sachiko embroidery. TAB continues to train the blind to become Sachiko embroidery makers in Chiang Mai and also has a plan to expand this project into Bangkok. There are a variety of products striped with Sachiko embroidery pattern such as scarfs, bags, key chain, home decorating products, coasters for glasses and so on. All handmade products made by blind embroidery makers in the Pakjitpakjai project are sold through a Facebook Page Pakjitpakjai.

The TAB and the Pakjitpakjai project participated in the Rehabilitation International Asia and Pacific Region Conference in Macao from 26 to 28 June 2019, their first international exposure. TAB representatives spoke about the Pakjutpakjai project.

TAB organized the booth in the exhibition to show and sell products. The Pakjitpakjai products were very well received and every item was sold.

The Pakjitpakjai team displayed products at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, International Disability Day at Thai Parliament and National Father's Day Exhibition at Sanam Luang field in Bangkok on December 5, 2019. The Pakjitpakjai team gave a souvenir bag embroidered with a dauphine figure to Paweensuda Drouin, miss Thailand universe 2019, to encourage her at the Miss Universe 2019 contest in the USA.

## **Braille Reading and Writing Contests in Thailand**

### **Thipyaporn Khempila writes,**

The Ratchasuda College in Thailand hosted the 25th National Contest and the 7th International Contest for Braille Reading and Writing. These took place on 17 and 18 January 2020. Funders and organisers included Ratchasuda College, Mahidol University, Thailand Association of the Blind (TAB), Foundation for the Blind in Thailand, and the Christian Foundation for the Blind in Thailand (CFBT).

The 25th National Braille Reading and Writing Contest was held on the first day.

Contestants in both Thai and English language reading categories were asked to read aloud an article in three minutes. This year, the winners, and 1st and 2nd runners-up from the braille English reading contest were included in the International Braille Reading Contest held the next day. There were also team reading contests by age groups of primary, secondary and high school, undergraduate and older people.

As well there was the Challenge to Read competition. Around one month before the contest, contestants in this group were asked to read on Facebook Live a braille text sent out by the committee. The committee evaluated the consistency and the quality of the contestants and announced the prizes on 17 January.

For braille writing, blind contestants competed in the categories for the Thai language grade 1 braille, English grade 1 and Nemeth mathematics code using their own 4-line slate and stylus. Sighted contestants competed in the Thai language grade 1 braille, English language grade 2 and mathematics Nemeth code using their own Perkins brailers.

The 7th Thailand international Braille Reading and Writing Contest took place on the second day. There were two age groups above and below 25 years. This year, there were 21 representatives from Laos, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand.

For the Braille Reading under 25 years category, the three prizes were awarded to contestants from Malaysia (the winner) and two from the Philippines earned the second and third prizes. In the over 25 years category, the top two prizes went to Malaysia and a representative from Thailand won third prize.

In the Braille Writing under 25 years category, the winner was from Vietnam. In the Braille Writing over 25 years category, the winner was from the Philippines.

Running alongside the two-day contest was an exhibition of braille in Thailand as well as exhibitors of technology and products for the blind from several blindness organisations and countries.

To appreciate the live ambiance of the two day contest, please go to the TAB radio Podcast available on Spotify.

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## **Ensuring no one is left behind in disasters**

**Karen Jack from cbm New Zealand writes:**

### **Shared learning between the Philippines and New Zealand**

Over the last four years in partnership with the New Zealand Aid Programme, cbm New Zealand has been supporting Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in the Philippines to help ensure people with disabilities are not left behind when disasters strike.

The Philippines is ranked third in the most disaster-prone countries of the world. Natural hazards from adverse weather and geological activity can have disastrous effects on those living with disabilities. Unable to see, hear or move around easily, they are at a greater risk of missing early warnings signs or be left behind during life-saving evacuations.

At the start of the partnership, there were no formal procedures in the Philippines to address this issue, but now after hours of collaboration, local governments and the OPDs are well equipped and confident in the specific measures needed to ensure people with disabilities are not left behind in disasters.

The four-year programme delivered a wide range of training to local governments and the OPDs. This included disaster simulation exercises, advocacy forums and training on how to diversify livelihoods to prevent income loss after a disaster have struck.

To celebrate working together, last September cbm New Zealand hosted ten delegates from the Philippines on a five day study tour, to exchange best practices and lessons learnt regarding disability inclusion in disasters. The Philippine delegation visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management (MCDEM), the Office for Disability Issues, and the Emergency Management Offices for Wellington, as well as Auckland Council.

One of the highlights of the tour was a half-day roundtable hosted by the Office for Disability Issues - a diverse group of people with representatives from the New Zealand government, not for profit organisations and New Zealand OPDs. The roundtable offered a platform for each of the participating organisations to share their experiences and ideas when responding to a disaster, including those of Blind Citizens New Zealand following the earthquakes in New Zealand.

Returning to the Philippines, the ten delegates ensured these important learnings were incorporated into their policy work and interventions. The study tour was of great benefit to both the Philippines and New Zealand. Being together and discussing the issues has strengthened the integration of national policies and practices to support disability inclusion.

cbm New Zealand is an international Christian development charity, committed to improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities in the poorest countries of the world. cbm works in areas of inclusive education, eye, care, rehabilitation and humanitarian relief in Asia, Africa and in the Pacific. For more information please go to <https://cbm-nz.org.nz/>.

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## **Volunteer platform helps visually impaired during Chinese New Year migration**

**p.china.org.cn by Jin Ling, January 27, 2020**

To see the photos and original text go to [http://p.china.org.cn/2020-01/27/content\\_75651543.htm](http://p.china.org.cn/2020-01/27/content_75651543.htm)

Xiaodu (anonym, left), a sophomore at Binzhou Medical University, waits in the line for people with special needs at Yantai South Railway Station with a volunteer named Xu Zhenshan. [Photo provided by Xu Zhenshan]

Chunyun, which is known as Chinese New Year migration, Spring Festival travel season, and the Lunar New Year rush in English, is the largest annual human migration in the world. China experiences an extremely heavy traffic load from about 15 days before Chinese New Year day until 25 days after it, especially on its railway system. Trains and railway stations become crowded, tickets are scarce, and other difficulties can emerge. This year, Chunyun will last from roughly Jan. 10 to Feb. 18.

Xiaodu (anonym) lost his eyesight when he was 10. He is currently a sophomore at Binzhou Medical University, which is located on east China's Shandong peninsula in the city of Yantai. The student is self-sufficient and usually travels independently.

Xiaodu is a loyal follower of a WeChat public account known as Sound Wave Help, which is run by the Beijing Sound Wave Disabled Persons' Social Service Center and is dedicated to providing comprehensive information and various assistance to people with impaired vision in China. About a month ago, he noticed that its 2020 Chunyun services became available. The system makes it possible for volunteers and staff who work at railway, subway, and bus stations to aid people with disabilities who travel during this period. Originally only available in Beijing when it began in 2015, it can now be used in more than 39 cities in China.

The student read about the history of the program and decided to try it out for himself. He filled out a form on his smartphone with details about himself and his plans. The next day, Moon Sister, a Yantai-based organization with 10,000 volunteers, contacted Xiaodu and confirmed the details of his trip. The organization has been helping people with disabilities from all over China travelling in Yantai for more than 10 years. It began providing Chunyun services this year and plans to continue to do so in the future.

Xiaodu had booked a ticket from the Yantai Penglai International Airport to his hometown. It was scheduled to depart at 9:10 p.m. on Jan. 6. The airport is located about 70 km from his university, so he asked for a volunteer to meet him at about 5:30 p.m. after he finished an exam and help him get on a shuttle.

The rain that had been falling throughout the day turned to snow in the afternoon, and the roads soon became icy, but the inclement weather did not stop the volunteer that was assigned to Xiaodu from arriving as scheduled. The staff at the shuttle bus station informed the two that the next bus would leave at 6:00 p.m. and the trip would take about three hours, however. The traveler would likely miss his flight because of the delay, so he used an app to buy a train ticket for the next day.

Xiaodu felt that he wasted the volunteer's time and energy and indicated that he would take a taxi to the railway station by himself. Moon Sister arranged for another volunteer to arrive early the next morning, however.

"I'm very moved that the volunteers arrived on time despite the blizzard that occurred on Jan. 6 and 7," the Sound Wave user said.

"The people that I have assisted have all been very grateful. I feel very happy to have helped them," stated Xu Zhenshan, founder of Moon Sister. Xu is a 68-year-old widow whose husband died when their son who suffers from cerebral palsy was only 11. In 2006, Xu and her son decided to begin volunteering to show their appreciation for the various aid that they received over the years. They help people with visual impairments read, handle online verification codes, and complete other tasks.

Six blind students from Changchun University pose with volunteers who provided by Sound Wave's partner at Changchun West Railway Station. [Photo provided by Sound Wave]

Xiaoyin (anonym), 20, is in his first year at Changchun University. He used Sound Wave's Chunyun service to arrange assistance for himself and five of his schoolmates who are also blind. They took the subway from their university to Changchun West Station. A mother, her son, another woman, and her daughter had volunteered to aid the group. They met the students at the subway station and helped them make their way to Changchun West Railway Station, where railway staff aided them with boarding their trains.

Xiaoyin was headed to Changsha in south China. He had to stop in Beijing, however, and transfer from Beijing Railway Station to Beijing West Railway Station in order to continue on his journey. Another volunteer was waiting to help him take the subway between the two stations and embark on the second leg of his trip.

"All of the volunteers were very kind," Xiaoyin said. "They made my trip faster and easier." He mentioned that the person who helped him in Beijing put a tag on his suitcase when they were on the subway. "The volunteers are very attentive," he concluded.

A volunteer training session in Shenzhen [Photo provided by the Shenzhen Accessibility Promotion Association]

The largest migrant city in China, Shenzhen began participating in Sound Wave's Chunyun service in 2016 and has offered year-round assistance to people who have visual or physical impairments ever since.

The Shenzhen Blind Association and the Shenzhen Accessibility Promotion Association organize the city's Sound Wave services. Additional volunteer organizations are beginning to participate, including a group that assists with subway

travel. People with special needs can receive help traveling to and from any subway station in Shenzhen and locations that are within about a one-km radius of them.

Shenzhen's services include a special relay system that makes it possible for different volunteers to assist users at different stages of their trips. For example, the closest available volunteer to a user will help them get to the subway, and a different volunteer will meet them at their destination. The practice saves a lot of time and improves efficiency.

“Chunyun really tests our limits,” explained Yu Guanbin, chairman of the Shenzhen Accessibility Promotion Association. “Some people have to scramble for tickets at the last minute, which leaves us very little time to make arrangements for them.”

Yu mentioned that two different volunteer groups once simultaneously accepted the same assignment. A WeChat group was created so that everyone can communicate in real time and avoid similar problems in the future.

Huang Yuehong, chairman of the Shenzhen Blind Association, stated that a group once had more luggage than the volunteer who was assigned to help them could handle. This year they suggested that Sound Wave keep track of how many bags users will have with them so that an appropriate number of volunteers can be sent. Huang also mentioned that a new hotline was added this year. Last year, some users were not able to get through when they called Sound Wave.

“The volunteers like to be the eyes for people who are visually impaired,” explained Gu Yajuan, head of Sound Wave services in Hangzhou, which is the capital of east China’s Zhejiang province.

It is hoped that more cities and organizations will become involved with the Sound Wave system so that travel will become easier and easier for visually impaired people.

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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.

## Paralympics: From Paralympic medalist to giving back - the Tewai Skipwith-Halatau story

A few years ago when Tewai Skipwith-Halatau went to hear fellow visually impaired Paralympian Mary Fisher speak, she couldn't believe how much medals had changed.

"Mine's just like a large coin," laughs Halatau, of the medal she won at the Arnhem 1980 Paralympic Games. "Mary's even has tactile sounds — it's amazing."

Fisher won four medals in the London 2012 Paralympic Games, 32 years after Halatau, as a young woman, claimed a ground-breaking bronze medal in the discus. The Arnhem 1980 Paralympics was Halatau's first great adventure in what would become a very busy life.

Hailing from a large Rotorua whanau of Tuhourangi and Te Arawa lineage, the journey started as a child attending South Auckland's Homai College which provided specialist education for blind students. Halatau — née Skipwith — had been without sight since early childhood after the rare genetic disorder (retinoblastoma) necessitated eye surgery.

"I've grown up so used to total vision loss that I can hardly remember the transition in my own life," she says. "I can remember being in the hospital going for the eye operations, but that's it. I don't really remember what vision is like. You just get on with life — and at Homai I used to really look forward to Friday afternoons when our fantastic Phys Ed teacher taught us all sorts of sports and activities for a couple of hours each week.

"She would make up all sorts of games using bell balls, and we did everything from ride on bicycles, stilt walking, and roller skating to gymnastics — I was taught how to use the parallel bars and the vaulting horse, everything. I loved the trampoline! She fostered a chance to try things and what I always really loved about it was the social activity of the games. So I became involved in competing in blind sports, which was run by Parafed at that time."

In her early 20s, her selection to the New Zealand Paralympic Team took her overseas to proudly represent her country (alongside husband and Paralympian #34 Latoa Halatau: the pair had met at school and Latoa also competed for New Zealand in Para athletics). Although Tewai had already travelled to Australia by then, it was her first long-haul adventure "and what a way to do it, flying as a team", she says.

"We became really good friends with the other athletes and went to each other's events. It was so exciting getting my team uniform, and once over there, we met Sir Paul Holmes.

"He was working in the Netherlands at that time. [As a young Kiwi journalist working for the Dutch World Service, he had been hired to narrate highlights packages of the Arnhem 1980 Paralympic Games and would later present two documentaries on Kiwi Paralympians]. He came officially to meet the New Zealand Paralympic Team and would sit around in the dorm and chat. Through the years at other functions, we would catch up again from time to time and he was always a great supporter and friend of Paralympic sport. It's the people you meet, that is what's special about sport."

Despite winning a medal at her Paralympic debut, Halatau says her career was short-lived because she didn't have an overwhelming desire to keep training. "For me, it was about fun. I really liked the sprint and the discus, and I would do the long jump, the high jump, the javelin as well. In Arnhem, I discovered a lot of other countries' athletes would specialise in one event whereas we just used to do everything, so it was a big surprise when I was leading the discus heading into the final round. I got overtaken by those last throwers, but I was just really excited to get anywhere!"

The bronze medal has lived in her top dresser drawer ever since, and it's only on rare occasions — like when she showed it to Fisher — that she takes it out.

But the great memories live on, and she pays tribute to teachers, assistants and coaches who instilled the confidence and skills to compete in track and field at the Paralympics.

"I came back from Arnhem thinking I would have a break, and it just turned into a very long break," she chuckles. "I headed to Auckland University to study law, then heard about a new social work diploma that was starting up in Epsom and switched to the first intake for that two-year course, as social work really interested me.

"Later in 1998 I did my Executive MBA through Waikato. Basically, my life went in other directions after Arnhem — I was never a hardened athlete, driven by sporting goals. I try and keep up walking for general fitness, but I haven't been involved in sport at all since those Paralympic days. My husband and I, however, recognise the value of sport in maintaining a person's mental and physical wellbeing and, after returning from the Paralympics, founded the gym and recreation programme at the Parnell campus of Blind Low Vision New Zealand."

In 1998, Halatau and her husband established Vision Pacific, a charitable trust covering the Greater Auckland area, and for the past 30 years Tewai has been a leader in disability development in the Pacific region and was a founding member of the Pacific Disability Forum — utilising the same confidence and networking skills with diverse cultures that she developed on her Paralympic adventure.

"We have a Ministry of Health contract to provide a service that helps disabled clients live an independent life," she explains. "We develop a plan with clients and help them to manage their own money, find work, find a flat, connect to their community and take part in social activities, so that they can make their own choices and lead the life they want to live."

In 2015, Latoa was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for his service to the blind and Pacific communities, and Tewai loves helping others reach their own goals.

"It's really rewarding work - I wouldn't trade it for anything!"

Story created by Storyation in partnership with Paralympics New Zealand. Source: NZ Herald 25 Feb, 2020 6:00am

[https://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=4&objectid=12311585](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/news/article.cfm?c_id=4&objectid=12311585)

## **Green Party passes landmark law to ensure deaf and disabled voices heard equally**

### **Editor's note**

In this article is a Māori word “kaupapa”. kaupapa is a set of values, principles and plans which people have agreed on as a foundation for their actions.

Chlöe Swarbrick's Members Bill to support disabled general election candidates has passed into law.

The Election Access Fund Bill establishes a fund, administered by the Electoral Commission, which may be used by any disabled candidate to cover disability-related costs of standing in a general election.

"The more New Zealanders engaged in democracy, the stronger we all are", Green Party spokesperson on Open and Accessible Government Chlöe Swarbrick said today.

"No future political candidate with disability should have to internalise the costs of barriers placed in front of them by design and systemic neglect.

"The bill passed today seeks to, in a small way, unpick those systemic barriers. Whether we identify with it or not, all of us will find ourselves disabled at some point in our lives, by an environment or service that never considered us, by accident, or as we age.

"Mojo Mathers' Election Access Fund Bill is a step towards a consciously more equal and empathetic playbook for how we as New Zealanders engage not just in politics, but our communities at large.

"Today our House of Representatives has solidified Green kaupapa to remove barriers to ensure more equal representation. It's a good day for equality."

The costs accessible in the fund could be used for:  
 NZSL interpreter support for candidate forums,  
 notetaker or transcribing costs,  
 costs of translating material into braille.

Source: <http://www.voxy.co.nz/politics/5/360093>, 11 March, 2020 - 18:02.

### **Audio Described Aotearoa goes online**

Royal New Zealand Ballet's announcement in April that it would livestream videos of previous productions, making them available to a global online audience, was seen by Audio Described Aotearoa as an opportunity to include blind patrons in the audience.

Aucklanders Nicola Owen and Paul Brown, co-directors of Audio Described Aotearoa, contacted RNZB and asked if it could include an audio described option of the ballet videos so blind and low vision people would also have access to them.

The answer was a resounding “Yes, why not?” by Pascale Parenteau, Education, Community and Accessibility Manager at the national ballet company.

The first three audio described online performances in April and early May, screening in April and May, received a total of 1110 views from a global audience.

The first online performance was Hansel and Gretel, a ballet that toured the country last year and included touch tours and audio described performances in Dunedin, Wellington, Christchurch and Auckland.

“We already had the audio description and introductory notes prepared so it was a matter of figuring out the best way to provide it online,” Nicola says.

The first attempt used the video conferencing tool Zoom to describe what was happening on the Facebook livestreamed performance. It “almost worked” but there was a time lag and the use of two devices made it complicated for the users, Nicola says.

The following week, 25 April, viewers were treated to Anzac Day screenings of Dear Horizon and Passchendaele. These two ballets were first performed in 2015 as part of the RNZB's Salute programme, a collaboration with the New Zealand Army Band commemorating the centenary of the Gallipoli landings.

This time, Nicola recorded the audio description and RNZB mixed it as a separate video, posting it on YouTube at the same time as the original video was livestreamed on Facebook.

“That worked really well and we had some great feedback,” Nicola says. “People also appreciated the introductory notes, which we emailed to them in advance of the screening.”

And then on 3 May, Romeo and Juliet was audio described. It was viewed 574 times.

Nicola recalls how “everything stopped” in March with the rapid spread of COVID-19 and the lockdown. Organisations started to cancel their audio described performances as they shut their doors.

But like many organisations, Nicola and Paul started to think outside the box and explore what was possible. “We were successful in our application to the Government's Wage Subsidy Scheme, which meant we were able to keep going – at least for a while.”

Now, Nicola is contacting other companies and asking about opportunities for Audio Described Aotearoa to provide online audio descriptions of their work.

“A lot of people in the disabled community are used to not getting out much and it feels as though online resources and events such as these audio described online performances are a great way to increase access to ballet,” Nicola says. “After things go back to normal, it would be great if we all remember what we've learned through this crisis.”

The big challenge, she says, is where the ongoing funding will come from to maintain and develop these accessibility opportunities.

Nicola, whose partner Paul Brown is blind, started audio describing events in 2011 for Auckland Live. As the demand grew, they formed Audio Described Aotearoa in

2014. Among her first and regular clients are Tim Bray Theatre Company and the Auckland Arts Festival.

Now, they contract up to ten audio describers around the country to provide high-quality audio description for a range of events and tours.

In 2017, Nicola was employed by Auckland Live and RNZB to audio describe RNZB's ballet, Romeo and Juliet. It was the first time ballet had been audio described in New Zealand and blind university student Áine Kelly-Costello wrote in a blog: "I could not have known what it would mean to attend a ballet with my mother: to experience the whole show, not just the music. It was an artform I had subconsciously assigned to the 'unreachable' pile."

Last year, RNZB's national tour of Hansel and Gretel with Nicola as the audio describer included three audio described matinees in schools and four public audio described performances. More than 200 blind and low vision patrons attended these performances.

"That was pretty amazing," Nicola says. "Blind people are often surprised that ballet is an artform they can enjoy. People in their sixties who had never been to ballet said they were blown away by the description and how beautiful it was.

"There's a sense of wonder that something that has been so inaccessible has now become accessible.

"People love the touch tours before the show but even without the tours in this new, online world, they are still experiencing that same sense of wonder."

Another highlight over the past year was the first bilingual (te reo Māori and English) audio described performance of the play Kuia me te Pūngāwerewere. This was presented by Taki Rua Productions to students at BLENNZ (Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ) Homai Campus in partnership with the Auckland Arts Festival and Kāpō Māori Aotearoa.

Source: <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/CU2005/S00066.htm?source=email> | Arts Access Aotearoa Press Release 11 May 2020.

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## Upcoming Dates for East Wind

Because this issue has been delayed, the dates for the next four issues of East Wind have been changed. . Please can you put these dates in your diaries so you can get your news to the Editor in good time.

Issue No. 32 is due in August 2020. Please send your news by 31 July.  
Issue No. 33 is due in November 2020. Please send your news by 31 October.  
Issue No. 34 is due in February 2021. Please send your news by 31 January 2021.  
Issue No. 35 is due in May 2021. Please send your news by 30 April 2021.

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

You should also check out our website [www.wbuap.org](http://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. 31, May 2020.