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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”

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Editorial

Mary Schnackenberg writes:

With this issue I begin my sixth year as Editor of East Wind. My first issue came out in January 2016 and since then I have guided our contributors through 16 issues. My partner, Clive Lansink, upgraded the WBUAP website.

Unfortunately 2020 saw just one issue of East Wind. I doubt there is any blind, deafblind, partially sighted or low vision person in the world who has not been negatively affected by COVID-19. The World Blind Union and several countries have published reports about the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people. Each of us has had problems with getting accessible information about the virus and what our governments want us to do. We've had problems with correct social distancing, discrimination against us from some members of the public, accessing suitable face masks, keeping our employment, even sometimes finding food. The very worst and also the very best of our humanity has been shown to us all.

Again I am pleased to share in this issue some contributions from around our region and some stories from the media.

Let us wish each other a much better 2021 as we learn from all our lessons from 2020 and build a better world.

Celebrate Gerel Dondovdorj

Mary Schnackenberg writes:

We join with Jose Viera, the Chief Executive of the WBU to proudly congratulate Ms. Gerel Dondovdorj, from Mongolia, on being elected as a member of the United Nations Committee monitoring the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Countries who have ratified the CRPD must provide reports to the monitoring committee whose members check how well the countries are doing upholding our rights. Ms. Dondovdorj, is the President of the Mongolian National Federation of the Blind and a member of the WBU Executive Committee. She also serves on the Board and Policy Council of the Asia-Pacific Region of the WBU.

Ms. Dondovdorj is among five women and three men elected by UN member-countries for the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2024. We are excited that the CRPD committee has finally achieved gender parity. This affirms the Committee's commitments against all forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities. We are proud of Ms. Dondovdorj and we welcome this great news as gender parity was achieved in this election. We believe that with Ms. Dondovdorj's presence on the CRPD committee, gender issues affecting women with disabilities, particularly blind and partially sighted women and girls, will be articulated and the indicators on sustainable development goal number 5 on gender equality will be attained. We are confident that she will strongly and effectively represent the rights and priorities of blind and partially sighted women and girls.

I was privileged to meet Gerel in January 2017 when I visited Bangkok to attend the meeting of the Board and Policy Council of the WBUAP region. Gerel's biographical note to the UN Committee of the CRPD tells us she lost her sight while she was an

under graduate law school student in Mongolia. She acquired the skills of a blind student. And she earned a Bachelor's Degree in Law, from the School of Law, at the Mongolian National University, a Master's Degree in Law, from the School of Law, Mongolian National University majoring in Human rights of persons with disabilities, and then a Master's Degree in International Human Rights Law, from the Law School of the University of Notre Dame, USA. Then she went on to advocate for the human rights of people with disabilities, including our rights to vote in national and local elections.

In East Wind No. 18, July 2016, we read: "Blind and visually impaired people of Mongolia are able to cast their votes in the upcoming national elections using braille ballot papers. The Mongolian National Federation of the Blind has printed braille ballot papers. We have assigned our partially sighted volunteer students as observers in the polling booths. The national law of the rights of persons with disabilities allows our members to vote either by having assistance from their legal caregivers or by using their braille literacy and the braille ballot papers. Blind people are able to participate in making changes in their own country's future and their own lives."

Some years earlier I met a blind social worker from a developing country. I asked her if she voted in her country's elections. She told me that she did not vote. She believed if she did either she would be beaten up or members of her family would be beaten up and someone might be killed. Whenever I cast my vote in national and local elections in New Zealand I think about that blind social worker and wonder if things have improved for her in her country.

I thank Gerel for all her advocacy successes, not only in Mongolia, but also for the influence she can now bring to improvements in human rights on behalf of people with disabilities all over the world.

For more information about the CRPD Committee, visit the UN Website
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/Elections2020.aspx>

The Blind Association of Korea joins WBUAP

The Blind Association of Korea (the organization of the blind in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) has been approved for membership in the World Blind Union. They are warmly welcomed to the Asia-Pacific region of WBU.

The Republic of Korea (also known as South Korea) has been a member of the World Blind Union for some years.

WBU-ICEVI General Assemblies 28-30 June 2021

Dr. Fredric K Schroeder (President WBU), and Dr. Frances Gentle (President of ICEVI) write:

The World Blind Union (WBU), the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), and the Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles (ONCE) are pleased to announce the new dates of the joint WBU and ICEVI general

assemblies. The WBU-ICEVI General Assembly will be fully conducted online from 28 to 30 June 2021.

The overall theme of the General Assemblies is “World Blind Summit: What it means to be Blind and Visually Impaired”.

The International Organizing Committee postponed the WBU/ICEVI general assemblies this year to protect the health and safety of participants as the world continues to combat the on-going Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

We strongly appreciate your understanding and patience as we work diligently to ensure full participation virtually. Our host organization, ONCE, will provide logistical support to ensure the highest level of participation possible.

The new format of the joint General Assemblies requires certain adjustments in order to reflect the new normal but also, to ensure compliance with our constitutions.

The International Organising Committee of WBU, ICEVI and ONCE, chaired by Dr. Fredric Schroeder, President WBU, continues the overall planning to ensure the event is a great success!

As more detailed information becomes available, it will be sent to our members and posted on our organizations' websites.

A 3-minute sharing

Jess Shek, General Secretary of the Hong Kong Blind Union, presents at #PurpleLightUp 24-hour Global Broadcast

I'm glad to be a part of this event to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which resonates to myself significantly as a person who's completely blind. For me, blindness is just a characteristic and it is not something to define myself and my future. Like my sighted counterparts, I'm well-educated with a master's degree in translation, and I have been pursuing a career in internal communication, a career of my choice!

Let me tell you my personal experience. Years ago I attended a job interview. The Hiring Manager asked me a question: “Will you drag the efficiency of the team if we hire you?”. I tried my best to convince him by quoting my proven experiences with previous employers, the assistive technologies that helped perform my work as well as my academic attainment. Somehow, I got the job and worked with the Hiring Manager for a few years. On my last working day for the job, he said to me: “If any employer is in doubt of your ability, ask them to speak to me and I'm happy to explain to them your abilities.”

This interview and work experience indeed has motivated me to do more to help companies remove their misunderstanding, prejudice and fear of disabled talents. Firstly, it has to start from myself: I strive to be a living example to demonstrate to companies that I am as capable as my able-bodied counterparts through my great job performance. In addition, I take up various speaking opportunities in corporate events to share my insights into disability inclusion. Also together with Hong Kong Blind Union, we've helped make the connection for companies to tap into the talent pool of disabled professionals. We also advocate to the Government to hire persons

with disabilities, and we feel it is important to implement an employment quota system for disabled persons.

A recent research project from the Business Disability Forum, found that building a team of local disability leads who are passionate about disability inclusion is crucial to progress this agenda locally. I have always been the first disability hire and subsequently more disabled talents join the organisation. This shows the importance to take that crucial first step.

Be bold. Opportunity is key to disability inclusion. Don't let the myths about disabled people's abilities to contribute in the workplace hold you back. Expand your talent pool to include persons with disabilities. A workplace with different abilities is a vital step to achieve social inclusion. Thank you.

More about the #PurpleLightUp 24-hour global broadcast

A 24-hour broadcast event took place on 2-3 December around the world in an effort to celebrate disability and inclusion, to coincide with the UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The event is being run by PurpleSpace, a global organisation supporting the Employee Resource Group (ERG) network leaders to drive cultural change, and brought together disabled thought leaders, CEOs of multinational organisations, politicians, disability rights activists and network/ERG leaders.

The purpose of #PurpleLightUp is to acknowledge the economic contribution of disabled employees worldwide. The free 24-hour global broadcast event started in Oceania at sunrise and ended in North America at sunset. The programme featured discussions, interviews and best practice sharing across six continents.

Visit <https://purplelightup.org/> for more about the event.

News from Thailand

New President of the Thailand Association of the Blind

Dr. Issavara Sirirungruang and Thipyaporn Khempila write:

On August 11, 2020, the Thailand Association of the Blind (TAB) organized the 23rd TAB National Convention at the Ambassador Hotel Bangkok, Thailand. This TAB annual event was created to gather, brainstorm and share knowledge and experience for more than 500 blind and non-disabled participants in multi-dimensions for instance, occupation, technology, social enterprise, blind youth, blind women, rights, laws, international affairs and exhibitions etc.

The TAB also held the election for the new president to run the TAB office. We were very please to welcome Mr. Ekkamol Phaetthayanan and the 15 members of TAB executive board. Mr. Ekkamol Phaetthayanan intends to promote and protect the rights of Thai persons with visual impairment in order to make the rights real and leave no one behind.

TAB has around 12,000 members from all over the country. The current TAB executive committee consists of 15 members, 6 of whom are representatives from TAB provincial branches, and the other 9 executive committee members are

delegates from representatives of provinces. And there are no more than 200 delegates of provinces at the National Convention. The administrative organizational structure of the TAB has two main sections of responsibilities: central and provincial sectors. TAB has 11 official branches around Thailand.

The TAB was established in 1967 and has continued to develop the quality of life of the blind in Thailand for more than 50 years. TAB has worked to support blind people in many aspects, such as encouraging access to education and employment, raising people's awareness, and reducing discrimination. TAB works with other international organizations such as WBU and WBUAP to cooperate with others overseas to learn, share and exchange knowledge and information of blind people's development.

TAB Cooperating with other Thai Stakeholders to Help Blind Thais during Covid-19

Thipyaporn Khempila writes,

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the TAB organized the "Covid-19 Rescue Center" to help all Thai blind people to deal with the pandemic. The TAB was supported by many public and private sectors who were willing to help Thai blind people through cooperation with the TAB and its networks. The headquarters of this center was at the TAB head office in Bangkok.

At the Rescue Center, the TAB provided some important items such as hand sanitizers and face masks and dry food such as instant noodles, instant processed fish and rice. Packages were posted to more than 1,300 TAB members around the country. The TAB ran a call center where staff gave to blind callers suggestions and they noted complaints about the effects from Covid-19. The TAB team would find the best solutions for the problems that callers raised.

The Thai government created the project "We stand together". All Thai workers could apply for the extra allowances of 15,000 baht (around 500 USD) paid out at 5,000 baht each month from April to June 2020. This was for those who had lost their jobs or were at risk of unemployment because of COVID-19. About 600 individuals were assisted with online registration by the TAB team. In addition there was one-year debt relief for people with visual impairment and also with other disabilities who borrowed financial support from the Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities Fund from April 2020 to March 2021.

Another provision was made through a one-off payment of 1,000 baht (around 33 USD). This was paid to disabled people who had registered their Thai persons with disabilities card. This financial support came from the Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities Fund. A one-off payment was made on May 29, 2020 to disabled people who have bank accounts. Disabled people without bank accounts could receive cash amounts from local governmental organizations.

Different assistance to help the vulnerable group including children, elderly people and disabled people was supported by paying 1,000 baht for each 3 months, totally calculated 3,000 baht. This vulnerable group were those not approved to gain funding from the "We stand together" project.

In Thailand, the COVID-19 pandemic has been controlled in the country. New infected cases are from overseas. Thai public and private organizations continue to

work with Thai DPOs including the TAB to protect all Thai citizens as much as possible.

Updates on the Marrakesh Treaty

Neil Jarvis writes:

I received news on 22 May of Vanuatu's accession to the Marrakesh Treaty. Congratulations to Vanuatu.

Chong Chan-Yau, from the Hong Kong Blind Union writes:

A Hong Kong legislative amendment passed in June 2020 is a voluntary adoption of the provisions in the Treaty to facilitate access to published works for persons who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise print disabled including cross-border exchange. China has signed the Marrakesh Treaty but has yet to ratify it. After ratification, the Treaty will then be made to apply to Hong Kong. Commenting on this, Neil Jarvis wrote that this was great news and he believed it would help China to ratify the Marrakesh Treaty.

Philippines White Cane Safety Day

Jose Go Ranola MBE, Chairman, Philippine Blind Union writes:

The Philippine Blind Union in collaboration with other organizations for the blind and visually-impaired communities in the country, celebrated the White Cane Safety Day with an on-line Conference using the zoom meeting platform and streamed simultaneously in the PBU facebook page on August 2, 2020. The Philippine legislature enacted in 1989 Republic Act 6759 entitled "The White Cane Safety Act" declaring August 1 as the White Cane Safety Day.

The World Blind Union CEO Jose Maria Viera and WBU Asia-Pacific President Michiko Tabata were invited speakers. They discussed WBU's global and regional initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as inclusion of the blind and visually-impaired community in receiving accessible information and being aware of Disaster Risk Management activities.

Other speakers were Dr Nantanoot Suwannawut of Thailand, Yukari Isheda, a young speaker from Free the Children Japan and Filipina Japanese office worker Aileen Bables Yamasaki. They shared their experiences and best practices during the pandemic. Yukari Isheda and Aileen Bables Yamasaki offered to fundraise for alternative livelihood training support for displaced Filipino blind workers in the massage industry who were most affected during this pandemic. Several similar on line conferences and forums were scheduled for the month of August to raise awareness among the public relating to issues and concerns of the blind and visually-impaired community.

Since August we have launched the "Digital Business Basics Training" course for Filipino blind massage Practitioners who were deprived of their means of livelihood during the COVID 19 pandemic. This 15-day online training course was conducted

by the ATREIV IT Center for the Blind with funding support from Free the Children Japan. Successful graduates were also awarded financial assistance to support their approved business plans. So far, around 50 have finished the course and 20 awardees were able to start their businesses in December 2020. Businesses approved included selling food, groceries, printing services etc.

Although massage clinics were allowed to operate again last September, most of the public are still apprehensive in having massages for fear of being infected. Thus the online business skills learned by the blind masseurs have empowered them in promoting their services and to conduct their businesses.

Results of the 18th Onkyo World Braille Essay Contest 2020

Ivan Ho Tuck Choy, Chairman, WBUAP Onkyo Selection Committee 2020 writes:

Due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic, the WBUAP Onkyo Selection Committee (WOSC) comprising Hiroaki Ishiwata from Japan, Jordina Howell from Australia, Prof. Kamonwan Inaram from Thailand, Godfrey Ooi and myself as Chairman from Malaysia, was unable to have a face-to-face selection meeting. Consequently, we had to conduct the judging individually from our country, with the scores and comments sent to me for the necessary action. We received 35 essays from nine countries - Australia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. There were sixteen essays for Group A and nineteen essays for Group B.

As in previous years, the WOSC found it most challenging in selecting the seven winners as the entries, especially this year, were better written, more interesting and with much feeling. While judging the essays, the members were not in consultation with each other; surprisingly, though we were thousands of kilometres apart, our scores were very close to each other. In fact, some of the scores were just a few decimal points apart. You can rest assured that we gave most careful consideration before arriving at the decisions.

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 verified the results from the participating regions of WBU.

Thank you ever so much for your kind co-operation and hard work in encouraging participation and in translating the essays into the English language. And here are the results you have been waiting patiently to hear.

1. The two Fine Works prizes of US \$200 each for Group A went to: Werut Bulbon, 17-year-old male from Thailand, and Ella Edwards, 16-year-old female from Australia.
2. The Fine Works Prizes of \$300 each for Group B went to: Hendra Jatmika Pristiwa, 45-year-old male from Indonesia, and Teng Wei Min, 66-year-old male from China.
3. The Excellence Prize of \$500 for Group A went to Loh Wee Han, 15-year-old female from Malaysia.

4. The Excellence Prize of \$500 for Group B went to Phan Dinh Viet, 38-year-old male from Vietnam.

5. The Otsuki Prize of \$1,000, selected from both groups, was awarded to Tran Binh Minh, 34-year-old male from Vietnam. The Prize was awarded to him for the following reasons:

(a) His determination to overcome all difficulties and take on great challenges by sacrificing time and enjoyments, is most impressive.

(b) His significant contributions in the work for the blind through job creation and the development of the music talent to bring about equality for the blind, is worthy of emulation.

(c) His unceasing efforts to realise his "true dream" of "I believe I can do, and you too", are most inspiring.

Here is more good news! Since the WOSC could not meet in person this year, thus drastically reducing the expenses, we decided to award seven Appreciation Prizes for each group whose scores were above 65 points. The decision was made for the following reasons:

(a) The essays were better written, more interesting and with much feeling.

(b) The scores were so close that we felt it necessary to reward the writers for their hard work.

(c) As the world is facing this gloomy situation, we thought this action would at least bring some cheer to the contestants.

(d) This Covid-19 Pandemic, destructive in all ways, did offer us an opportunity to do something positive with the hope that this action will encourage more participation in the 2021 Contest.

6. The seven Appreciation Prizes of \$100 each for Group A were given to:

6.1. Amanda Pudelka, 15-year-old female from Australia.

6.2. Chen Xiao Tong, 19-year-old female from China.

6.3. Ma Di Di Zin, 18-year-old female from Myanmar.

6.4. Nghiem Thu Loan, 22-year-old female from Vietnam.

6.5. Teoh Zhan Feng, 20-year-old male from Malaysia.

6.6. Yang Xin Tian, 16-year-old female from China.

6.7. Zhao Hou Ren, 16-year-old male from China.

7. The seven Appreciation Prizes of \$150 each for Group B went to:

7.1. Aprilyn M. Manguiat, 30-year-old female from Philippines.

- 7.2. Iyeheskiel Parudani, 44-year-old male from Indonesia.
- 7.3. Marife C. Flores, 29-year-old female from Philippines.
- 7.4. Martine Abel-Williamson, 48-year-old female from New Zealand.
- 7.5. Nguyen Van Son, 57-year-old male from Vietnam.
- 7.6. Sim Sin Wee, 45-year-old male from Malaysia.
- 7.7. Xu Bo Yin, 56-year-old male from China.

The WOSC members extend our hearty congratulations to all the winners, and our deep appreciation to all of you who had participated but did not get a prize. Do not be discouraged but do try again next year.

Once again we express heartfelt gratitude to our Sponsor, The Onkyo Corporation, for their strong support in promoting Braille literacy, and their generous financial backing despite the tremendous difficulties brought about by the Coronavirus crisis.

I want to place on record my heartfelt thanks to Michiko Tabata San, President of WBUAP, and her Council members for allowing me to chair the 2020 Contest. I also take this opportunity to express my very grateful thanks to all the members of WOSC (their names mentioned above) for having made their contributions towards the success of the 2020 Contest in the face of such trying times.

Unified English Braille and ICEB Newsletters

Mary Schnackenberg writes:

Braille users in the Asia-Pacific region are reading more and more Unified English Braille (UEB) books and magazines. Even though there are some differences between UEB and earlier braille codes for the English language, those differences have given us clearer rules that make UEB easier to produce and read, in my opinion.

However, UEB has to stay up to date with the ever-changing world of print which keeps adding new symbols, especially in maths and science. The organisation that approves any changes to UEB is the International Council on English Braille (ICEB).

If you're a braille user (a reader, teacher or transcriber), I encourage you to join the ICEB Announce email list. It's a very low traffic high importance list for ICEB to circulate its newsletters and tell us about any changes they have approved. It is not a discussion list.

To join the ICEB announcements email list just send an email to iceb-announce+subscribe@groups.io

During 2020 we've been thinking about the 75 years' history of the United Nations. Shortly after the Second World War the World Braille Council was established. It's first task was to publish the first edition of world Braille Usage. Braille users turn to that book as it lists most of the braille codes used in the many languages spoken and

written around the world. The current edition of World Braille Usage, published in 2013, was paid for and prepared by Perkins School for the Blind and the Library of Congress in the USA with some funding from ICEB. There is a need to revise World Braille Usage as some language codes are being updated or added.

Around the same time that the World Braille Council began after World War II, the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB) was established. In 1984 the WCWB joined with the blind people's organisations of the International Federation of the Blind to set up the World Blind Union (WBU). In 2012 the WBU made the World Braille Council a permanent committee of the WBU. ICEB is still a member of the World Braille Council. This is important because it means that braille authorities and braille code developers around the world are talking with each other. This has been made more possible by technology such as email, the internet, Zoom and much more.

With encouragement from the World Blind Union, the United Nations General Assembly declared 4 January to be World Braille Day. 4 January 1809 was the birthday of Louis Braille. Many countries around the world are now marking 4 January and recalling Louis Braille's gift of literacy and numeracy through braille and also his music braille code, a gift that keeps on giving to braille users now and into the future.

From the Media

Disclaimer

We're receiving a number of articles about blind and partially sighted people that have appeared in the newspapers online 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 of the media articles in this newsletter.

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.

80% of audible traffic signals for blind in Japan silenced to appease residents

More than 80% of Japan's accessible pedestrian signals -- traffic lights that also emit sounds to let pedestrians with visual impairments know when it's safe to cross the road -- have their noise-making function disabled for at least part of the day, a Mainichi Shimbun survey of the country's 47 prefectural police forces has found.

The survey revealed that many of the accessible signals, also called audible pedestrian signals, only emit sounds during daylight hours, often due to consideration for or complaints from residents. However, there have been serious accidents involving visually impaired pedestrians, including at least one death, during the times when the signals' noise function has been turned off.

Associations representing people with impaired vision are calling on the central government to boost safety measures.

All of Japan's prefectural police forces had responded to the survey by December 2020. The results showed that, as of the end of fiscal 2019, there were 208,152 traffic lights in Japan, of which only 24,367 were audible pedestrian signals. A total of 20,445, or 84% of these, were set not to make sounds for part of or even the entire day.

Every audible signal was on a restricted schedule in the prefectures of Akita, Yamagata, Tochigi, Hyogo, Tokushima, Fukuoka, Nagasaki, and Okinawa. Meanwhile, only 30 to 40-odd-percent of the signals in Iwate, Miyagi and Kagawa prefectures were on limited schedules. According to the Japan Federation of the Visually Impaired (JFVI), many of the signals have their noise-making function shut off between 7 p.m. and 7 or 8 a.m.

There was a total of 37 accessible signals in nine prefectures including Fukuoka, Kumamoto and Gunma that had their audible function turned off entirely. Asked why the signals had been disabled, police forces in Kochi and Kumamoto said residents complained they were noisy.

Furthermore, though the law calls for making "daily life-related routes" -- roads connecting train stations, government offices, welfare facilities, hospitals, commercial complexes and the like -- barrier-free, the survey revealed that 6,189 audible traffic signals on these routes across Japan had time limitations.

The survey also found that there had been at least 77 injurious or fatal traffic accidents involving visually impaired pedestrians since 2015. Twenty of them were at pedestrian crossings without audible signals, and at least two happened during hours when the local signal's audible function had been switched off.

In one of these two cases, in December 2012 a visually impaired 64-year-old man was struck and killed by a car while crossing a street in Tokyo's Toshima Ward when he did not notice that the pedestrian light was red.

"There aren't enough audible pedestrian signals to begin with, so it's very disappointing that even most of those on daily life-related routes are not in operation 24 hours a day," said JFVI section head Munemasa Sasaki. "There are people with disabilities who work overtime and go home late, and they (the authorities) are taking disabled people's activities in society too lightly. I'd like to see improvements before there's another accident."

Source: The Mainichi Japan FUKUOKA 30 December 2020
<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201230/p2a/00m/0dm/007000c>

Technology Empowers People With Disabilities

Twenty-two people with visual impairments are attending a digital business training and coaching course for four months in Hanoi to help them adapt to the fourth industrial revolution and co-exist with COVID-19.

The trainees are mostly selling products online or working to become sale co-ordinators of brands.

Despite losing their eyesight, they believe they can take advantage of digital entrepreneurship opportunities and technology empowers to have stable jobs during the turbulence of the pandemic.

Luong Thi Hai Yen, a visually-impaired trainee, said blind people like her, with voice assistance and support from others, can use computers to learn digital business knowledge and skills to approach customers and how to advertise products.

Like many other blind people, Yen's main job used to be at a massage parlour in Hanoi.

More than 100 massage parlours and other service venues which provided jobs for visually-impaired people in the capital city were closed as non-essential services during the COVID-19 social distancing period earlier this year.

Being among millions of people with disabilities nationwide who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with consultation from others, Yen decided to learn marketing skills and sell perfume online.

She acts as a sale co-ordinator who advertises products, orders the perfume and has it delivered to customers and can earn a stable source of income during the pandemic.

“For visually-impaired people, selling products online has some difficulties. For example, we cannot advertise products through images. Instead of doing that, we livestream, write descriptions to make advertisements or directly consult customers,” she said.

“The disabled have limited ability to move around. Thanks to technology empowers, we are connected with the outside world so that we know how the world is developing and what chances, including job opportunities, are available for us,” she told Vietnam News.

Tran Trung Hieu, Chairman of the Vocational Training Centre of the Hanoi Blind Association, said those with visual impairment and the disabled in general are among the hardest hit by the pandemic.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Rapid Assessment on Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 which interviewed more than 900 people with disabilities in Vietnam in May, 30 percent lost their jobs during COVID-19. Nearly half had their work hours reduced, and almost 60 percent had their pay cut.

Up to 72 percent of the interviewees had an income of less than 1 million VND (44 USD) in March when the first wave of the pandemic peaked in Vietnam.

“Not only facing challenges during the COVID-19, but people with disabilities also have difficulties in the fourth industrial revolution. They have little access to information technology,” Hieu said.

With the support of the UNDP and Japanese government, the four-month course will provide digital skills training for people with different disabilities to adapt for digitalisation after COVID-19.

Many of the trainees have already started to run their businesses or practise online marketing skills.

“We [the disabled] have been present on the internet and are ready to engage in the supply chain,” Hieu said.

Dao Thu Huong, UNDP Vietnam's disability rights officer, said working online from home helps people with disabilities cut travel costs and minimise travel difficulties caused by traffic. While working at home, they can get personal assistance when needed, face less discrimination and be better protected from psychological pain.

Nguyen Hanh Thu, a disabled English teacher in Hanoi, believed that with tools like computers or tablets, people with disabilities can do their jobs, earn incomes and reduce the pressure on their families.

Thu suffers from spinal cord injuries and has been in a wheelchair for 30 years. Over the past 30 years, she has been running free English classes for poor students, those in disadvantaged circumstances and people with disabilities like her.

Due to the impacts of COVID-19, she has made use of the internet to offer online classes to her students.

“I always encourage my disabled children to learn English and information technology skills and then use digital technology to earn money. That's how technology works for the disabled,” she said.

Source: Vietnam News <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/817541/technology-empowers-people-with-disabilities.html> 3 December 2020

China has 8 million blind people, but only 200 guide dogs

At the age of 11, Yang Kang lost his vision due to a rare type of eye cancer. But he considers himself one of the lucky few among China's millions of blind people -- he has a guide dog.

Yang splits his time between living in Beijing with his wife and running a piano studio in his hometown Tangshan, a sprawling industrial city some 100 miles away.

His weekly journey consists of a high-speed train ride, two bus rides and three subway transfers through often-crowded stations. It would have been impossible for most blind Chinese, but Yang is blessed with a furry companion that guides him every step of the way -- Dick, a four-year-old Labrador.

Guide dogs like Dick are so rare in China that Yang waited five years to get one. According to state broadcaster CCTV, China only had some 200 dogs in service as of April -- which makes them even rarer than the giant pandas.

The service dogs' scarcity is all the more striking considering the large number of people who could potentially benefit from their help. The China Association of the Blind estimates the country's visually impaired population to be over 17 million. According to the World Health Organization, eight million Chinese are completely blind -- roughly equal to the whole population of Switzerland.

That's one guide dog for every 85,000 Chinese people who have partially or fully lost their eyesight.

In comparison, about one in 50 blind and visually impaired people in the United States work with guide dogs. In Britain, over 1,000 guide dogs are trained each year for a total of 36,000 people who are registered as blind or partially sighted.

Dangerous streets

Navigating Chinese cities can be a daunting task for the blind to manage on their own.

A 2016 survey by the China Information Accessibility Product Alliance found that 30% of the country's visually impaired seldom leave their homes; only one in four regularly go outside by themselves, with the remainder mostly shepherded by family and friends.

Before Dick came along, Yang had to rely on his white cane to get around -- but he said it was difficult and dangerous to cross the multi-lane highways and navigate the numerous pedestrian overpasses and tunnels that make up the Chinese capital by himself. "I was in constant fear," he said. "The most terrifying thing is that I have no idea what the road ahead is like."

While much progress has been made in recent years, Chinese cities are still far from disabled friendly. Even in Beijing, accessibility is lacking in many places -- for instance, not all pedestrian crossings have audible traffic signals for the blind, Yang said.

Even when accessibility facilities are in place, they sometimes fail to serve their purpose. Most Chinese cities, for example, have tactile paving designed to guide the blind lining sidewalks along major streets -- as required by a law passed in 2001. But they are often unfriendly or downright dangerous to use. Some are built to zigzag down a street, while others lead straight into trees, lamp posts or fire hydrants. Many are constantly occupied by illegally parked cars, bicycles or street vendors.

"The 'blind paths' are basically impossible to walk on," said Yang, who gave up following them years ago. "They're not built or maintained with the convenience of blind people in mind."

CNN's asked the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development whether it is overseeing how tactile pavings for blind people are built and maintained, but did not receive a response.

The poor upkeep of roads, in general, often poses another hazard -- Yang once fell into an uncovered seven-foot deep manhole while passing through an old residential compound. Luckily he did not suffer serious injuries, and managed to climb out of it.

In China, manhole covers are often stolen to be sold for scrap metal. According to state media, there were more than 70 publicly reported injuries or deaths due to stolen or broken manhole covers between 2017 and 2019. The incidents are so prevalent that China's Supreme Court announced stricter punishments in April, subjecting those who remove or damage manhole covers in busy areas to the maximum sentence of the death penalty, when it leads to serious injury or deaths.

China's first guide dog school

Yang first learned about guide dogs in 2008 -- when a golden retriever led Ping Yali, a partially blind long jumper who won China's first Paralympic gold medal, into the opening ceremony to relay the torch for the Beijing Paralympic Games.

After three years of researching and making calls, Yang finally found out where to apply for one -- a guide dog training center in the northeastern city of Dalian.

Founded in 2006, the Dalian China Guide Dog Training Center was the first of its kind in China -- but similar facilities existed internationally for decades. The world's first guide dog school was established during World War I, in Germany, to help returning soldiers who had been blinded on the front lines. The US got its first guide dog school in 1929, and the UK in 1940, according to the International Guide Dog Federation.

Wang Jingyu, an animal behavior expert at Dalian Medical University, decided to train China's own guide dogs after noticing that, unlike their Western counterparts, blind Chinese athletes did not have guide dogs to help them during the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games, said Liang Jia, a staff member at the Dalian center.

Without any prior knowledge or experience, Wang researched online how to train guide dogs and sought help from international experts.

When the center opened in 2006, about 50,000 people called from across China to apply for a guide dog -- but Wang only had two to offer. "Our office phone was ringing off the hook," Wang told state-run news agency Xinhua.

The facility has expanded over the years -- it now keeps 100 in various stages of training, and more than 20 graduate each year.

The puppies -- mostly Golden Retrievers and Labradors, chosen for their gentle, friendly nature -- are first sent to foster families for a year to learn to live with humans, before returning to the center for another year of professional training. It is a lengthy and strict process -- along the way, about 60% of the dogs will be disqualified and put up for adoption as pet dogs. The causes for disqualification can include showing aggression, having excessive energy, being overly sensitive to pressure, and lacking the ability to remain focused, as well as suffering from car sickness.

After passing all the evaluations, a qualified guide dog will be matched with an owner and undergo another 40 days of joint training, before it can follow the owner to its new home.

Limited by funding

Over the past years, a few smaller guide dog training centers have opened in China, but the Dalian center remains the country's largest, and one of the only two recognized by the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF). In general, it's hard to get the funding to start or continue running a center. And to be qualified by IGDF, a center needs to pass a strict evaluation process, which can be difficult for those without sufficient funding.

The other IGDF-approved school, Yunnan Erxin Dog Guides, opened in Shanghai in 2018. Before that, the Shanghai Disabled Persons' Federation had been commissioning a police dog training center in the nearby city of Nanjing to train guide dogs for its visually impaired citizens.

The lack of funding is a key constraint for China's guide dog schools, Liang said. As a nonprofit, the Dalian center provides guide dogs to applicants for free, but each animal costs about 200,000 yuan (\$30,353) to train. In the early years, Wang used his own savings to keep the center running. Then, in 2010, the Dalian government started to subsidize the center with 60,000 yuan (\$9,106) for each guide dog it trains. The center also receives donations from the public, but they're often not enough to cover the cost -- currently, it faces a 30% budget deficit, according to Liang.

"If we had more sufficient funding, we'll be able to train more guide dogs," Liang said. "But the reality is, we can only operate on the money we've got."

The center currently has about 30 instructors. Many of them are young university graduates who are passionate about dogs and helping others -- and are committed enough to accept a monthly salary 60% below the city's average income.

Liang, who graduated from university in 2011, gave up her job offer as a civil servant to join the center as an instructor -- against the advice of everyone around her. "My parents disapproved it, and my boyfriend broke up with me because of it, but I had my mind set on the job -- it is a cause that's worth devoting my passion and youth for," she said.

Liang hopes the government -- especially the central government in Beijing -- can offer more funding, given that its guide dogs are offered to applicants not just from Dalian, but all over China. The center is also trying to raise public awareness about guide dogs on social media, hoping to bring in more donations.

Public acceptance

Yang, and other guide dog users, said that guide dogs have become more accepted by the Chinese public in recent years. More often than not, they are allowed on subways, buses and trains, especially in first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen.

But some other cities still have a long way to go. In April, in an attempt to test public acceptance, a traffic officer in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, pretended to be blind and tried to board a bus with a guide dog. He ended up being waved off the bus by the driver and scolded by some passengers for wasting their time. The video of his encounter went viral on Chinese social media, drawing calls for more public awareness on the difficulties faced by the country's blind.

While guide dogs have allowed Yang and others to travel more freely, there are also obstacles -- many hotels still don't accept guide dogs, and buying a plane ticket can sometimes turn into a bureaucratic nightmare. Even if a guide dog has valid work permit and proper vaccine certificate, many airlines requires a separate health certificate -- the kind needed for the transportation of pets and farm animals, which can be tricky to obtain.

Chinese laws are vague on the use of guide dogs in public. The Law on the Protection of Disabled Persons says "blind persons shall comply with relevant state

regulations when entering public places with guide dogs," but it doesn't specify what the "relevant state regulations" are.

Some cities have issued their own policies to allow guide dogs in public places and transports, but enforcement can be spotty.

Yang said he had been turned down by bus drivers, hotels and restaurants, but he wasn't discouraged. Instead, he treated every refusal as an opportunity to let one more person learn about guide dogs.

"There are only some 200 guide dogs in a country of 1.4 billion people -- the chance of meeting one is extremely low," he said. "That's why we need pioneers to introduce them (to society.)"

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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. 33 is due in April 2021. Please send your news by 31 March.

Issue No. 34 is due in July 2021. Please send your news by 30 June.

Issue No. 35 is due in October 2021. Please send your news by 30 September.

Issue No. 36 is due in January 2022. Please send your news by 31 December 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. 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. 32, January 2021.