

# East Wind No. 33

May 2021

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:

This issue has again been delayed. The volunteer leadership in the region has been busy with activities ahead of the World Blindness Summit and our region's own General Assembly at the end of June.

I began my involvement with Blind Citizens NZ in the early 1970s. I was around to see the formation of the World Blind Union and I have watched its progress since 1984. In 2015 I came back to help with East Wind and the WBUAP website.

I know this past year has been very disruptive for each of us. Some of us find it hard to give room to WBUAP work. However in my view, our work is needed today, now more than ever before. Please can we find the energy to build better as we learn from the lessons of COVID-19 and develop social justice for everyone.

In this issue we learn more about how Thailand has been dealing with COVID-19, the Hong Kong Blind Union has run two important webinars, and there's information about the upcoming Regional Assembly as well as the World Blindness Summit. We are delighted to share that our region's Martine Abel-Williamson is standing for the role as President of the World Blind Union. To finish off, there are several articles from the media with our usual cautionary disclaimer.

We are very keen to get an issue of East Wind out in July. We are looking forward to sharing the outcomes of the World Blindness Summit as well as our region's General Assembly.

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## World Blindness Summit and WBUAP Regional Assembly

The World Blind Union (WBU) and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) will hold their World Blindness Summit online for the first time. The General Assemblies that would have been held in Madrid in Spain were postponed last year due to the raging Corona Virus Pandemic. The World Blindness Summit joint assemblies will be held from 28 to 30 June 2021. All sessions and workshops will be held online and you will need a good internet connection to be able to join in.

As well there will be a WBU pre-session and internal business week beginning Tuesday 21 June continuing to Friday 25 June. Delegates will have the opportunity to discuss and adopt internal WBU matters such as activity reports, WBU resolutions, elections etc. For quorum purposes, all delegates will have to participate in this week especially when decisions must be agreed.

The World Blind Union Asia Pacific (WBUAP) Region is holding our own Regional General Assembly on Saturday 26 June 2021. The meeting will be held over Zoom starting at 04:00 hours universal time. This is 11:00am in Thailand and Vietnam, 12:00 noon in China and Mongolia, 1:00pm in Japan and Korea, 2:00pm in Australia and 4:00pm in New Zealand. During the Asia Pacific Regional Assembly we will receive reports from the Regional President, the Treasurer and the Returning Officer.

To join our Regional General Assembly you need to register for the WBU General Assembly which is part of the World Blindness Summit. Blindness organisations in our region are sorting out delegates and some have already done so. Lists of delegates must be sent to <mailto:ga2020@wbu.ngo> by 31 May 2021.

Each delegate must also register and observers are also very welcome. The Registration Form for the World Blindness Summit is at <https://www.worldblindnesssummit.com/en/inscription>.

Before you register you will need to be sure whether you are a delegate or an observer. If you register as a delegate your name and details will be checked against the delegates' list provided by your country. Registrations must be made before 5 June 2021.

You can also read the program on <https://www.worldblindnesssummit.com/en/schedule/program>

Some of us in New Zealand have noticed excellent sessions being held during our night time. And then there are some parallel sessions. But we don't need to worry about missing out on anything. All the sessions will be recorded and we will be able to listen at a later time.

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## **Martine Abel-Williamson Stands for President of WBU**

### **Mary Schnackenberg writes:**

MS. Martine Abel-Williamson has been nominated by her country, New Zealand, for the role of WBU President.

Martine was born in Namibia, South-West Africa. Her family moved to South Africa so she could attend a school for the blind. Later she earned degrees and post-graduate qualifications and diplomas in education and psychology. After immigrating with her family to New Zealand in 1996, she gained qualifications in vision rehabilitation and social policy.

For 11 years Martine held roles in local government as a disability advisor. Currently she is the Senior Human Rights Advisor at the Human Rights Commission in New Zealand.

From 2007 to 2016, Martine served on the WBU Asia-Pacific Board and Policy Council. She maintained roles on the women's committee, UNCRPD Network, UN Advocacy Co-ordination and as WBU Executive Committee member.

Martine was elected the WBU Treasurer in 2016. Since then she has had oversight of WBU finances and has led several other WBU projects. In particular she had advocated about accessible public transport and the challenges of silent cars. As access and inclusion consultant Martine also works with government and international agencies in areas such as disability inclusive disaster risk reduction and co-design of health and disability services. She liaises continuously with the WBU Asia-Pacific region and Pacific Disability Forum (PDF) to ensure inclusion of smaller countries in decision-making processes.

## Personal statement by Martine

We need to stay unified and focused during this challenging era of COVID-19, and I am committed to facilitate us at world-wide level through these changing times. I wish to continue advocating for blind people internationally; I believe in servant leadership and I am passionate about people collectively making a difference for all. No one is insignificant and I strongly believe that the WBU is the vehicle for us to make this happen.

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## Two online seminars from the Hong Kong Blind Union

### Web Accessibility

On 22 October 2020 the Hong Kong Blind Union ran an excellent online seminar about web accessibility adoption in the Asia Pacific region. The outcomes of their web accessibility survey were presented and, in addition, there were stimulating speakers.

You can read more about the seminar and access the recording at <https://www.hkbu.org.hk/en/about/latest-news/detail/34>.

### Building a disability-inclusive workplace

Diversity and inclusion has become a business priority. An Accenture study [https://www.accenture.com/\\_acnmedia/PDF-89/Accenture-Disability-Inclusion-Research-Report.pdf](https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-89/Accenture-Disability-Inclusion-Research-Report.pdf) found that companies that offered the most inclusive working environment for employees with disabilities in the U.S. achieved an average of 28 percent higher revenue, 30 percent greater economic profit margins, and twice the net income of their industry peers between 2015 and 2018.

The Hong Kong Blind Union organised a webinar on 16 April 2021 where speakers from the World Blind Union, Microsoft and Be My Eyes explored how to build a disability-inclusive workplace. There was also a demonstration on how assistive technologies could help a visually impaired person's day-to-day work.

A recording from the webinar is available from Hong Kong Blind Union. See <https://www.hkbu.org.hk/en/about/latest-news/detail/49>.

If you have any enquiries about these seminars feel free to reach out to the Hong Kong Blind Union at <mailto:info@hkbu.org.hk>

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## Mission Accomplished for the TAB Covid-19 Rescue Center

### Thitiworada Koitong writes,

It has been almost three months since the Thailand Association of the Blind established the "Covid-19 Rescue Center" as part of the mission to assist Thai blind nationwide through the difficult times of the pandemic.

This time of crisis was called the second wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in Thailand. As well, it was the second time that TAB ran this kind of rescue center with the different aim from the first time. At the beginning, TAB had to cope urgently with the critical shortage of personal protective equipment, such as face masks, hand sanitizers, etc. For this second time, the main focus was shifted to bring relief to Thai blind suffering financial stress.

During these few months when most public places were forced to shut down, many Thai blind lost their income, especially those who worked as massagers, singers and lottery sellers, the popular jobs for the blind people in Thailand. Yet, with all the generous supports delivered to the rescue center from a variety of public and private sections, TAB successfully achieved the goal to provide them with the help they needed.

In the distribution of the relief supplies packages, the team of volunteers would put a packet of rice, packs of instant noodles and tinned fish contributed by the donors together in each individual package. With a very kind offer from Thailand Post, about 8,000 packages were posted without a shipping fee to those with visual impairment, both TAB members and non-members, who asked for help via a phone call. Also from the donations, TAB supported about 4,000 blind people without any salary by paying 400 Baht (about 12USD) to each person.

The Thai government launched several campaigns, such as “Half-Price”, “We Win”, and so on with its financial relief scheme for the citizens. As the campaigns required online registration, TAB took a supporting role to help the blind who lacked access to the internet, smartphones or the information. The TAB staff helped them to register through a call center.

On March 26th, 2021, the mission to begin the “Covid-19 Rescue Center” was fulfilled and its committee decided it was time to finish its work and officially close down the center. Although there is no guarantee for any situation in the future, TAB has been well-equipped with knowledge from these experiences and has the capacity to be of assistance and provide immediate responses for all Thai blind in any difficult times to come. Definitely, these achievements cannot happen without the great supports from all over.

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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 Editor gives priority for selection to articles from countries in the region other than Australia and New Zealand. 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.

## Hong Kong's blind community sees brighter future with guide dog center

China's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is building its first dedicated training facility for guide dogs.

A former school is being redeveloped into a state-of-the-art complex that will revolutionize the support available for the city's blind and partially sighted community.

The facility will be run by Seeing Eye Dog Services (HKSEDS), a non-profit organization. It has been operating for almost 10 years and has provided more than 20 dogs to people in need.

In 2012 it became the first internationally accredited guide dog school in China.

Hong Kong resident Koonie is among those who have benefited from the service. "Before I was paired with my dog, I used to get very anxious going out at night as I could only see lights," she said.

"I used to have many injuries by walking into objects such as bicycles handlebars, overhanging scaffolding and street signs that a walking cane could not detect."

She said the arrival of her dog Happy changed all that. "My dog can guide me through obstacles, help me cross the road, and lead me to post boxes and bus stops," she said. "She has given me independence and lifted a dark cloud over my head. She is not only a good guide, but also family and a dear companion."

HKSEDS currently has no headquarters, and all its new dogs live with their trainers until they are ready to be matched with a visually impaired owner.

HKSEDS Chairman Raymond Cheung said the new school will transform that process. "With the new facilities, the administration, operation, dog training, and user training can all be grouped in one place," he said.

"This will be more systematic, increase efficiency, and improve the overall quality of the service we can offer."

The new school will have a range of specialized training zones including bridges, tunnels and areas with different ground surfaces to help prepare the dogs for city life. This is especially useful to help them learn how to navigate the densely populated streets and varied urban landscapes of Hong Kong.

The dogs will all have kennels on site, and the school will also offer temporary accommodation for their potential new owners, so the important initial matching process can take place in a controlled environment.

Guide dog trainer Brenda Pang said she can't wait to start working at the new center. "Training requires teamwork, but, currently, the trainers live all over Hong Kong and we do not have a place where we can train our dogs together and share feedback," she said.

"With the new facilities, we will have space to do group training every day, so I can see my fellow teammates and work together more often."

HKSEDS holds around 100 public talks and school education programs every year and hopes the new training facility will help them expand that by holding regular open days.

Chairman Raymond Cheung said public education is an essential part of the work they do. "We hope the public can learn more and accept the dogs in our community," he said.

"The dogs not only support visually impaired people to be more independent and walk with confidence, they also become soulmates to them."

HKSEDS aims to have the new school up and running by the end of the year.

Source: CGTN, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-01-23/Hong-Kong-s-blind-community-sees-brighter-future-with-guide-dog-center-Xhq05xHQys/index.html>, 23 January 2021.

## **Dogs who perform a valuable public service**

Some dogs are model citizens. Like a guide dog named AJ, who has been appointed an "honorary theater manager" at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center to promote the use of guide dogs at cultural events.

As part of his honorary role, the dog also participates in public service announcements filmed by the center to help the disabled and attends promotional events.

The center has earmarked seats on the ground floor for the visually impaired.

Visually impaired people and those who have adopted retired guide dogs are eligible for free tickets to the center. Guide dogs are allowed to accompany those who are blind or of poor sight into the center.

Shanghai started training guide dogs in 2006, and 55 have "graduated". Of those 39 are still working dogs.

The dogs are generally Labrador.

A guide dog needs to begin training when it's about 2 months old, and its service time is generally 6 to 8 years. After retirement, the dogs may be adopted by families meeting certain criteria.

Source: Shine, <https://archive.shine.cn/metro/Dogs-who-perform-a-valuable-public-service/shdaily.shtml>, 28 January 2021.

## **Supermarket alters store to aid visually impaired**

A supermarket specially equipped to accommodate blind customers in Yuncheng, Shanxi province, garnered public attention recently after a customer uploaded a video online showing visually impaired people shopping without obstacles.

In the video, a visually impaired customer was shopping alone on the barrier-free path in the supermarket that was renovated half a month ago. Along with the path, the supermarket also set up a separate shopping zone, printed Braille labels on products and installed quick pay devices for people with disabilities. "I hope paths like this everywhere can be scientifically designed and truly used for people," a comment for the video said.

Li Weixuan, the owner of the supermarket, told guancha—an online news and comments aggregator—that his visually impaired elder brother inspired him to make the changes. "My brother said he always bumped against barriers in the store, making trouble for the shop assistants, and that's why he doesn't go to the supermarket anymore," Li said.

Li designated a special zone for barrier-free shopping near the entrance of the supermarket, where goods have Braille labels and price tags. Guide dogs are allowed to enter the market, and paths have been created for the blind around the entrance. Visually impaired customers can follow the lanes to a dedicated cashier and then to the exit.

Customers can make payments by holding up their smartphones to the new quick pay devices without opening any app, Li said.

Asked by netizens if they could copy his idea and apply it elsewhere, Li said he was willing to share his experience with other supermarkets. "When it comes to public benefits, there's nothing wrong with copying," he said.

Li's efforts have been warmly received by his patrons.

A visually impaired woman surnamed Zhao said she used to need family and friends to accompany her, but the barrier-free path in this supermarket is really convenient.

Another customer commented on a feedback brochure: "I have never seen lanes for the blind being created in a supermarket before. It's very warmhearted of the owner to notice the needs of a minority. Thumbs-up to him and his devotion to public welfare."

Dangerous accidents due to illegal blocking of such paths are not unusual.

In September, two visually impaired people encountered more than 30 obstacles, such as trees, wells and telephone poles, on a 300-meter-long path for the blind, which resulted in them receiving several wounds on their knees, according to Xinhua News Agency.

In October, the local government in Yuhuan, Zhejiang province, launched a rectification of defective blind paths that collapsed or didn't have signs indicating the designation.

Earlier this month, a woman with brittle bone disease fell from her wheelchair while traveling through an incomplete barrier-free facility. She later died in the hospital. More people like supermarket owner Li are expected to voluntarily renovate barrier-free paths to aid people with physical disabilities.

Source: China Daily,  
<http://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202102/09/WS6021bf2aa31099a234353e1c.html>,  
 9 February 2021.

## **Blind School enrolment declines**

The COVID-19 crisis has posed challenges for visually impaired students.

Many parents have lost their jobs, which has resulted in the decline in the number of visually impaired students attending schools.

Fiji School of Blind School Head, Sharmila Chandra says parents have promised to send their children back to school once the situation normalizes.

"There has been quite a lot of movement due to COVID-19. This is because some parents lost their job and some were not able to afford renting in urban areas so they had to move back to their villages. They did not want to take the children away but there was no other option but they have informed that as soon as things normalize, students will rejoin the school."

Despite the hardships and academic barriers, the students have managed to excel academically.

Many of the visually impaired students have become a part of major organisations in Fiji.

Source: FBC News, <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/blind-school-enrolment-declines/>, 13 April 2021.

## **Guide dogs trained to serve Beijing Winter Olympics**

Founder of a guide dog training base in Dalian, northeast China's Liaoning Province, said that they have started training dogs to serve the Beijing 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

"We've basically prepared 31 guide dogs for athletes and staff at the Games," Wang Jingyu, founder of the Dalian branch of the China Guide Dog Training Center and director of the Laboratory Animal Center at Dalian Medical University, was quoted as saying by China Daily on Tuesday.

As China's first professional guide dog training center, the Dalian base was established in 2006 on the university's campus.

To mark International Guide Dog Day, which will fall on Wednesday [28 April], trainers from the base took some guide dogs to a local park on Saturday to promote public awareness of guide dogs, Wang said.

The base has provided more than 240 free guide dogs to visually impaired people around the country since 2006.

However, it is still impossible to meet demand, Wang said. Each year, tens of thousands of visually impaired people apply to get a guide dog.

Source: Xinhua, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/27/c\\_139909104.htm#:~:text=BEIJING%2C%20April%2027%20\(Xinhua\),Olympic%20and%20Paralympic%20Winter%20Games,](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/27/c_139909104.htm#:~:text=BEIJING%2C%20April%2027%20(Xinhua),Olympic%20and%20Paralympic%20Winter%20Games,) 27 April 2021.

## **Ride-hailing for the blind: Didi promises accessible travel**

Didi Chuxing, the ride-hailing and urban transport tech company that ate Uber's lunch in China, seems to be getting serious about accessibility for people with disabilities.

For most Chinese mobile users, the ride-sharing revolution has made travel as easy as tapping a button. But for Zhou Tong, the gains remain out of reach.

"There were countless times when I had issues getting a cab, and when the driver saw my guide dog, his initial reaction was to refuse the ride," said Zhou (in Chinese).

Zhou is one of 17.5 million visually impaired people in China who have long faced barriers unbeknownst to the majority: buses without announcement systems, elevator buttons without Braille, and locks without voice activation.

But now, as the digital revolution gets under way, the visually impaired are facing new barriers even as China's tech giants promise to break them down. Life in Chinese cities is increasingly difficult if one can't use mobile phone apps, and Didi has become China's main way to access taxis and other transportation.

Just navigating the complex interface of the Didi app is difficult enough for the visually impaired, but the troubles don't stop even when Zhou manages to order a ride. "Many drivers count guide dogs as pets, and since pets aren't allowed in cabs, there's a high chance I get rejected," she said.

### **Didi makes some accessibility promises**

On April 13, Didi signed an agreement with the China Association of the Blind (CAB) to reduce barriers for the visually impaired in the ride-hailing process.

Accessibility issues — which Chinese often refer to using the adjective *wuzhangai* (literally, "barrier-free") — became a topic of discussion on Chinese social media following the news. Per the agreement, the Association will provide Didi with data to help verify blind passengers who require special services, while also providing consultation throughout the process. Li Qingzhong, the president of CAB, said that accessibility, especially in the domain of travel, was a prerequisite for the visually impaired to participate in any social activity. "We hope that Didi's experiences can be extended to more companies," he said.

The news follows the ride-hailing giant's earlier initiatives to improve its accessibility services. Last September, Didi launched the "accessible travel service" program, which sets out to help passengers with certified guide dogs "find a car, avoid rejection, and complete their travel smoothly." The service covers 74 cities nationwide so far.

The service makes hailing a ride easier for the visually impaired, prioritizes their order, and alerts certified drivers that they are not to refuse the order and must provide assistance if necessary. More than 1.8 million Didi drivers have completed the "accessible travel service" certification, which is more than half of all drivers in

the cities where the service is offered. Certified drivers are trained to provide as much assistance as possible and never to refuse passengers with guide dogs. “We believe more drivers will join the “accessible travel service” program as they begin to better understand the service,” said Luo Zhenzhen head of Didi’s corporate social responsibility unit. Drivers receive awards and an additional bonus of 10 yuan (\$1.50) per order after serving passengers with guide dogs.

### **Traveling for the visually impaired is a common challenge for many countries.**

In Japan, train stations offer ticketing machines with Braille buttons and voice prompts. Tactile paving helps the blind navigate inside the station, and some companies are experimenting with more involved audio guidance systems. In the U.S., Uber makes its software compatible with voice-over features and wireless Braille displays. In China, there are laws that ensure that the visually impaired have access to public spaces. Article 16 of the Regulations on Construction of Accessible Environments mandates that “staff working in public places must provide accessibility services to the visually impaired in accordance with relevant state regulations.”

But Didi is ahead of most competitors in the transportation industry on the issue of accessibility. Prior to working with the visually impaired, it rolled out a number of solutions for those with special needs. They include Didi’s more spacious, wheelchair-friendly Accessibility Car and the child-car-seat-equipped Baby Car, both launched in 2017.

“We hope our experience can be referenced and put into practice by our peers,” said Luo. “On the issue of social responsibility, there are no competitors — only partners.”

Source: SupChina, <https://supchina.com/2021/04/29/ride-hailing-for-the-blind-didi-promises-accessible-travel/>, 29 April 2021.

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## Upcoming Dates for East Wind

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.

Issue No. 37 is due in April 2022. Please send your news by 31 March 2022.

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. 33, May 2021.