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By Merrick Ho

The theme of the 1992 Green Paper on Rehabilitation Policies and Services is "Equal opportunities & full participation: A better tomorrow for all" delivers the message of "as long as promoting equality and full participation, a new era will be opened up that allows full development of strengths and potentials". For many years, Hong Kong Blind Union holds onto this belief and advocates independent living of the visually

impaired, while promoting the importance of building an inclusive society. Moreover, we are dedicated to advocating the mutual-help spirit of our members, and broaden the domains of independent living for the visually impaired through collaborating with various organizations and government departments in different aspects.

On 8 October, we organized the “Cane-a-thon” International White Cane Day 2017. On that day, we gathered at the Tsing Yi Promenade and joined hands with over a hundred of our members, their families and friends and the general public to finish a 3km walk, and put the key message of “We can, with a Cane & Joining Hands” into action. We wanted to express our heartfelt thanks to everyone who have made this event a success.

Our Executive Committee member Chi-wun Chiu, who is also one of the top fundraisers, shared her views on a diverse society in her article “Actualizing the harmonious society by accepting the differences”. She is neither angry with the unfriendly behaviors of the others, nor contented with being misunderstood. Shouldn’t her attitude of humility, respect for diversity and acceptance of differences be practiced by the society at large?

Our outgoing Vice-President Billy Wong illustrated various examples of advocacy work of the Equal Opportunities in Social Participation Committee in his article “Everyone can benefit from universal design” and candidly expressed doubts about the existing unfair situations which are byproducts of technological advancement. Billy has strived for equal rights for the blindness community for over a decade. His reflection helps bring order out of chaos, while serving as a reminder to the Hong Kong society that the equality as well as sustainability of the public policy and public service can only be achieved by considering the needs of all social groups.

Fortunately, there are individuals who are willing to strive for equality in access to information technology. We are honored to have received a donation from the family of Mr. Tam Kam-bun, which enables us to acquire the latest multi-media equipment and provide relevant skill trainings for our members in order to elevate the IT skills of the visually impaired. In the article of “Continue my late father’s education concept by

promoting the modern Four Literacy Treasures” by Ms. Suk-ki Tam, we are not only moved by her memories of her beloved father, but are also touched by the vision of education of the Tam family. Here I would like to thank the Tam family for their contributions in enabling the multi-media software trainings opportunities for the visually impaired.

Whether it is advocacy for equal rights or equal access to information technology, there is a large piece of uncharted territory awaiting us to discover. Therefore, your support and donations are of utmost importance to us. We have already placed donation boxes at the 69 branches of Café de Coral and Tai Hing Catering Group, and we sincerely wish that all of you can make donations and support us while enjoying a delectable meal. You can also become our “Blind Unions’ Supporter” and support our community and advocacy work through making a monthly donation.

Lastly, being a new Executive Committee member, I am thankful for being selected as the Chief Editor of the Newsletter. This Newsletter can serve as a platform for me to share with you Blind Union’s stories and happenings. Your comments and feedback are welcome, and will motivate us to continuously improve and strive for the best.

Everyone can benefit from universal design

By Billy Wong

As a cosmopolitan city, Hong Kong should promote diversity and inclusion and implement Article 9 “Accessibility” of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities so that accessible information, transport and environment as well as public facilities, goods and services can be provided for all citizens, regardless of whether they are disabled. However, much effort still has to be made to improve the current situation. Therefore, our Equal Opportunities in Social Participation Committee (EOSPC) has been working unceasingly to strive for the rights of the visually impaired. We would like to share three examples of our advocacy work with you.

First, in order to enhance efficiency and to be cost-effective, it has become a worldwide trend to replace traditional banks with ATMs and online banking. However, this has brought lots of inconveniences to the visually impaired as it is difficult for them to operate the touch screens of ATMs. Therefore, EOSPC has ceaselessly been advocating the introduction of ATMs installed with voice navigation function and keyboards by local banks. The efforts finally paid off after all these years of persistence, and three major banks have already introduced such machines, which have brought much convenience to the visually impaired. Moreover, we also insist that all banks should take the needs of different social groups into consideration based on the concept of universal design, before introducing any kind of new services including increasing the availability of the ATMs with voice navigation function and ensuring that online banking complies with the web accessibility guidelines.

Another example which is of our most concern is that there have been more and more electric vehicles on the road in Hong Kong. Since the engines of electric vehicles are nearly silent when traveling at low speeds, the visually impaired are unaware of the presence of the vehicles. As a result, these brand new vehicles pose potential danger to the visually impaired. Realizing the potential risks that are borne by electric vehicles, we have urged the Government to enact legislation to enforce all electric vehicles to produce sound while traveling at low speeds, in order to alert visually impaired pedestrians that the vehicles are approaching. Although such measures have been adopted widely in Europe and North America, it's a pity that Hong Kong Government has not taken any necessary actions.

For Hong Kong being a knowledge-based society, the distribution of textual information is of utmost importance. Yet the books that allow the visually impaired to read independently are in short supply. The Marrakesh Treaty that promotes barrier-free reading has been rectified by over 20 countries. Recently, Hong Kong Government has agreed to initiate the legislative amendments and conduct public consultation, in response to the appeals from various organizations for persons with disabilities. We will continue to monitor the situation and urge the Government to start the legislative process as soon as possible, so as to enable persons with visual impairment and print disability to have accessible format of all kinds of publications.

We share with you our recent advocacy work not just because we want you to understand the needs of the visually impaired. We also want you to understand that before introducing any technology, products or services, we have to take into consideration the needs of various groups in the community. If Government departments, commercial firms and public service providers understand the concepts of accessibility and universal design, our advocacy work will become much easier while the visually impaired can live a more independent life. Hence, all members of our community can enjoy the benefits of a smart city. Nevertheless, we still need your support and collaboration before the vision of a smart city comes true. Likewise, we need your support and collaboration in all of our advocacy work.

Continue my late father's education concept by promoting the modern "Four Literary Treasures"

By Suk-ki Tam

Editor's note: In memory of her late father, Mr. K.B. Tam, the author made a donation to Hong Kong Blind Union (Blind Union) for the acquisition of multimedia equipment and helped fund our visually impaired members to learn multimedia software. Fred Leung, the author's spouse, is our active member.

Throughout his lifetime, my father used to lay great importance of education for the younger generation. 50 years ago, there was no universal free education in Hong Kong. Many times, he assisted our relatives and friends in applying for different kinds of scholarships available for their children. As for ourselves, the five brothers and sisters in all, needless to say he has done as much as he could for that matter. We were by no means to enjoy well-to-do living standard by definition. Yet father would provide everything adequately in terms of schooling, household and furniture as well as stationery. All of us had our own small desks, which were arranged and decorated as little personal space according to individual taste.

Every Sunday, we did our school work after breakfast. We read or recited text passages in preparation for dictation test, did math exercises, practiced Chinese calligraphy, practiced typing ... - making the area look just like a small study room. What a memorable feel indeed! In the afternoon, father would bring the whole family outdoor to take photographs at Village Gardens, watch animals at the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens, savour tea at Tung Tin Restaurant taste roasted squab at Lung Wah Hotel in Shatin ... What bits and pieces of childhood memories were and what a pair of unforgettable parents they were.

My mother was a good wife and mother by all means. But on education matters of the children, father was the one who had the role definitely. To continue father's education concept, Fred and I decided to make a donation to Blind Union for helping realize multimedia learning for the visually impaired.

The HKSAR Government fully implemented inclusive education in 2000 to give students with special educational needs fair chances to receive appropriate education. Over the course of 17 years, the effectiveness of this inclusive education programme might not be known as yet. Nevertheless, in the age of ever-changing advancement of Information Technology, are all of the visually impaired children and young adults equipped with updated and sufficient computer knowledge and skills that suit their needs and interests, so as to meet social change? Even if the Education Bureau and other NGOs have organized various IT-related programmes, can the visually impaired afford to attend these programmes? Do the software and hardware suit their special educational needs?

In light of these considerations, both my husband and I decided to make the donation to Blind Union, an organization that we entrust, in order to contribute to the provision of programmes of multimedia design and software skill training. We truly believe that Blind Union is an organization that is full of energy and endorsed with credibility, and its mission is to strive for the rights of the visually impaired.

We would like to express our gratitude to Blind Union for making a well-planned arrangement regarding the use of our donation. We sincerely hope that more visually impaired individuals are encouraged to take full advantage of multimedia equipment and facilities, so as to make a better

planning for their studies, careers and hobbies. Thus they can benefit from the progress of Information Technology.

Actualizing the harmonious society by accepting the differences

By Chi-wun Chiu

15th October of every year marks the International White Cane Day, which commemorates by holding the white cane, the visually impaired can go out independently, explore the road ahead, overcome all kinds of obstacles, lead the way and live the lives to full extent. In other words, white cane symbolizes the ability of independent living of the visually impaired, while it also differentiates the visually impaired from the sighted people walking on two legs or traveling with wheelchairs.

Recently I have participated in the “Cane-a-thon” International White Cane Day 2017 and the slogan of the event is “We can, with a cane & joining hands”. Unlike previous years, aside from holding my white cane that symbolizes independence, I am accompanied by my guide dog Holly.

I have been living with Holly for nearly a year. Many people asked me whether walking with a guide dog is more convenient than with a cane. What is the difference between the two? In fact, both have their distinctive advantages. Let’s talk about the guide dog. On one hand Holly helps me to walk briskly and freely on the roads, and reduces the risks of being hit by pedestrians either on purpose or accidentally on the roads that I can walk with ease. But on the other hand, I need to spend much time on taking care of Holly’s daily living and health. Nevertheless, the hardest part is to adjust to the pedestrians’ reactions towards Holly and me on the street.

Almost every time when we go out, we would attract different kinds of gazes and attention. Since some people cannot resist the beauty of Holly,

they would express their affection for her by making all kinds of noises and gestures to seduce her, and even take sneaky pictures of us. Some people would test on Holly to check if she is a good and responsible guide dog and is able to resist temptations around her by standing in our ways, imitating my instructions and petting her. Some people love to give advices to us and discuss about our every move right in our faces. Some people would overreact because of fear, and as a result we are scolded by strangers occasionally.

I am getting used to encountering these kinds of people, and understand very well why they react this way. Nevertheless, every time when I go out that even though I cannot see their faces, it's clear to me that many of them are talking about and judging us in a low voice. Some would even take pictures of us without permission with their smart phones which makes us feel disrespected. This feeling is very much like going back to the society of the 1960's and 1970's, when the pedestrians would be astonished at the sight of the visually impaired walking with their white canes in the street. It was a well-spread rumour that one would experience "three years of bad luck" if being touched by the white cane of the visually impaired. As a result, many of the visually impaired have the experience of being scolded and urged by the pedestrians that "the blind should not go out". The above scenarios seem weird and surreal in today's society. However, these scenarios are replayed everyday, as the saying goes, "Old wine in new bottles". The uncomprehending difference leads to outdated responses. Therefore we have to step out and help society to understand diversity and respect differences.

I wonder why the visually impaired have to celebrate for "being independent and self-strengthening". In fact, "Independence" is neither equivalent to denying our limitations nor rejecting help from others. "Independence" is not simply a slogan or praising for the exceptional perseverance of persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities do not wish to become superheros in inspirational stories. "Independence" represents the notion of universal value, which encompasses mutual respect and acceptance between each other, the right to live with dignity, the opportunity of equal participation in society, the right to express one's needs, feelings and demonstrating one's capability, and making choices for oneself independently. Only then can the harmonious society exist.

On the discussion concerning people with disabilities in Hong Kong, people tend to look into the matters from welfare perspective. They keep

asking “how can we ‘help’ people with disabilities?” and raise the question as a giver. Whilst “Independence” represents the ideology that one should put human rights in perspective and ask “How can our society enable people with disabilities to have full participation?”

As a visually impaired person, I hope that our blindness community should not live with a sense of inferiority, or pessimistically believe that we can only be rejected, looked down on and misunderstood by others. Instead, we should learn to forgive others for not understanding us and embrace our own identities. We should be bold to take part in society, express ourselves, live the life we want as well as hold onto the spirits of “being independent and self-strengthening”. Although the visually impaired still face lots of challenges in aspects of employment, education and participation in society, the efforts made by our predecessors and even the achievements we have to date can be the driving force for us to move forward. On the other hand, we can’t help feeling curious, puzzled and even scared when facing the social groups that are different from us. I hope that along with the actualization of the fundamental human rights, the true value and capabilities of different social groups can be recognized, and all members of society can have equal opportunities to participate whilst living with dignity, being respected and accepted.

Acknowledgement

「心睇·力行」 國際白杖日 2017 "Cane-a-thon" International White Cane Day 2017	
ACCA Hong Kong	特許公認會計師公會
Baby Kingdom	親子王國
Cathay Pacific	國泰航空公司
Economic Digest	經濟一週
Hong Kong Monetary Authority	香港金融管理局

LBS Group	史偉莎集團有限公司
New Monday	新 MONDAY
New World First Ferry Services Limited	新世界第一渡輪服務有限公司
The Kowloon Motor Bus Co. (1933) Ltd.	九龍巴士有限公司
VTC Accountancy and Financial Services Alumni Association	職業訓練局會計及財務學校友會
Flag Day 2017 賣旗日 2017	
Association of Hong Kong Nursing Staff	香港護士協會
Bank of China (Hong Kong)	中國銀行香港
Building Department Volunteers Team	屋宇署義工隊
Christian Family Service Centre - Dick Chi Day Activity Centre cum Hostel	基督教家庭服務中心 - 迪智展能中心暨宿舍
Christian Family Service Centre - Tsui Lam Integrated Vocational Rehabilitation Service	基督教家庭服務中心 - 翠林綜合職業復康服務
Companies Registry	公司註冊處
Construction Industry Council	建造業議會
Eaton Hong Kong	香港逸東酒店
Ebenezer School	心光學校
Guide Dog Association	導盲犬協會
Hong Kong Association of the Deaf	香港聾人協進會
HSBC	香港上海滙豐銀行

Hong Kong St. John Ambulance Brigade Youth Command	香港聖約翰救傷隊少青團
Lady Lau Memorial Study Centre	劉葉淑婉紀念自修中心
Megastrength Security Services Co. Ltd	宏力保安服務有限公司
MTR Corporation	香港鐵路有限公司
Operation Dawn	香港晨曦會
Park Hotel Group	百樂酒店
Peak Tramways Company Limited	山頂纜車有限公司
Shaw College, CUHK	香港中文大學逸夫書院
Sino United Publishing (Holdings) Limited	聯合出版(集團)有限公司
Smark B. TV	
Standard Chartered Hong Kong	渣打銀行（香港）
Star Industrial Co., Ltd.	星光實業有限公司
Tack Ching Girls' Secondary School	德貞女子中學
The Hong Kong Federation of Insurers	香港保險業聯會
The Hong Kong Joint Council of Parents of the Mentally Handicapped	香港弱智人士家長聯會
Wonderlife Universal Limited	活色生香國際有限公司