

Better Tomorrow for All November 2023

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Editor's Remarks

By Merrick Ho

In my childhood, I once heard someone say, "It's impossible to make a living by chasing a dream". Chasing dreams may not provide instant sustenance for you but it gives us direction for a bright future, make our life exciting and light up the others. All interviewees of the featured stories left nothing to pursue their dreams. Hong Kong Blind Union is pleased to accompany them and provide timely support in eliminating the obstacles they encounter, enabling them to achieve the full potential.

In the "The Harbour Race dream of a visually impaired swimmer" story, we clearly see Joseph's passion for his dream as a visually impaired swimmer, even after being rejected from participating in the Harbour Race. His ambition has improved the physical strength and inspired him in problem-solving skills. I wish that our community can better cater to the needs of visually impaired individuals and commit to providing suitable barrier-free access and facilities. We can't wait to see Joseph in the Harbour Race one day.

Anthropic factors could often be the showstopper for fulfilling our dreams. The "The challenge of visually impaired travellers: Explore the world freely" story shows the barriers that our member Jennifer faced in embarking her dreamy trip to Japan. Despite the current policies and the development of barrier free access facilities in Hong Kong, we are devoted ourselves to public education and promotion. This allows frontline operators to execute effectively, ensuring visually impaired individuals always have equal opportunities in daily lives.

Whatever our dreams may be, they require us to break through the boundaries in reality and go beyond every possibility. Wing, the protagonist of our last story, overcame the limitations of blindness and demonstrated his capability to live independently among a hundred of participants in a charity walk. Wing has been an inspiration and role model for others, with affirmation towards himself and his family.

As mentioned above, anthropic factors are the key elements that determine if our dreams can be fulfilled. We are incredibly grateful for the support received from our donors and various organizations. Without their tremendous support, we couldn't have made the "Cane-A-Thon" - International White Cane Day a successful event on October 15, 2023. Looking ahead, the Hong Kong Blind Union will be holding a Hong Kong Island Flag Day on January 6, 2024. Please join us as a volunteer and join hands in promoting our comprehensive services for visually impaired people in Hong Kong.

The Harbour Race dream of a visually impaired swimmer

By Ma Wing-man

We all have had dreams. Do you still remember those dreams from early days? Did you truly go after your dreams with no regret?

Chasing dreams is never easy, especially for visually impaired people, every single step can be extremely challenging to them. Our member, Joseph Yam, had a dream of participating in The Cross Harbour Race. However, his application was rejected. Upon hearing this news, Joseph asked himself, "How could I make a step forward with my dream?"

He started swimming practice at a designated public swimming pool very frequently. There are 45 public pools managed and operated by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, but the only choice for Joseph is the Kowloon Park Swimming Pool, which is far away from his home in New Territories. His sessions are limited to Mondays, Wednesdays, and Sundays, when a specific lane is assigned for persons with disabilities, including visually impaired individuals. Joseph is totally blind. It is likely for him to get into the way of other swimmers by accident in the regular lanes. Therefore, he deliberately practiced at night. He said, "Everyone goes home to have dinner with family and friends at night, so there wouldn't be other swimmers in the lane, I could practice with peace of mind."

Looking back on this year, he started with locating the changing room, bringing himself to the pool, and finding his own slippers and towel on the first day. Now Joseph feels at home in the swimming pool. He has even developed his own practice wisdom : "I tie my slippers together with my white cane and put them next to signage for visually impaired persons. If the accessible shower room is occupied, I make a tapping sound with my white cane as a friendly reminder to the user that there is a visually impaired person waiting." Joseph wore a smile of victory when he talked about his stories, "Sometimes, I question myself why I put in so much effort in swimming while sitting in the park eating bread alone. I might be better off having dinner with my family at home."

Joseph has no stable job nor income, he admitted "I have to make sacrifices in order to save my expenses for pool admission fees. For example, I cut down on my gatherings with friends. It indeed brings positive impact because I must control my intake of starch and protein strictly, for an ideal body condition for swimming."

Although Joseph has put in a tremendous amount of effort in practicing, he cannot be a part of the game. He exclaimed: "Being the first visually impaired swimmer of the Harbour Race is just a halo and glory of the moment, and soon there will be more visually impaired swimmers completing the game and surpassing my achievement." Despite the disappointing reality, Joseph's hard work of diligent practice persisted last

year has lighted-up his days and even crowned his life. "I am grateful to be a brave person pursuing my dreams at this age. I am still passionate and optimistic about my wonderful life."

Although Joseph still cannot be a swimmer of the Harbour Race, he has been wholeheartedly practicing throughout the past year, like all other swimmers. He keeps moving forward in the turbulent world. "I have indeed completed the Harbour Race in my own way, just on a different date, at a different place, I swum 1,000 meters in the swimming pool."

Looking ahead, Joseph shared his determination: "I have never thought of giving up the Harbour Race." With the new technology and changes in our society, he wishes that one day he will see his name on the list of Harbour Race swimmers.

In the past nearly 60 years, Hong Kong Blind Union has proudly accompanied many visually impaired friends through their journey. And, we will always be with them pursuing their dreams. For example, the Union has implemented the "Seeing Joy In Music" programme that provides professional vocal and instrumental training for visually impaired individuals. The programme also offers various opportunities for stage performances and overseas competitions which are beneficial in pursuing their musical dreams. Early next year, we will be joining the "Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon" with 10 visually impaired runners for the first time. We are running towards the visible dreams without seeing.

We hope that visually impaired people can be treated equally in our community and have the same opportunities as everyone else. By respecting our diversity as individuals and accepting people of differences in cultural and leisure activities or public affairs, we could make our dreams come true.

The challenge of visually impaired travelers: Freedom to explore the world

By Ho, Ho-yuen

Hong Kong citizens are now leaving behind the shadow of the pandemic and being so excited to travel abroad. Jennifer, who is totally blind, couldn't wait to embark on a trip to Tokyo, one of the favourite destinations for Hongkongers.

We all share this experience in the airport. It is a longer journey from the check-in counters to the boarding gates, and you come across countless directional signage in the vast airport terminals. It is the same in Hong Kong and in Japan. Even sighted travelers have to pay extra attention to stay on the right way. Traveling alone is undoubtedly a challenge for visually impaired people. Therefore, many airlines offer point-to-point transfer services to passengers in need, from check-in counters to boarding gates, ensuring they board the plane on time.

Before her trip, Jennifer intended to fly with a Hong Kong airline. She made ticket booking in April and requested transfer services from the airport check-in counter to the boarding gate. Unfortunately, her request was rejected, leaving her helpless and feeling discriminated against. To make her long-awaited trip come true, Jennifer had come to the Blind Union.

Upon hearing from Jennifer, we reached out to the relevant airline and the Civil Aviation Department for follow up. After rounds of negotiation, Jennifer finally made her journey to Japan. With appropriate escort support from the local crew, she flew back to Hong Kong after a pleasant and enjoyable trip. After that, we addressed the issue to the Civil Aviation Authority, which in turn requested all airlines to make every effort to provide timely and suitable assistance to visually impaired people, ensuring everyone enjoys equal opportunities for solo travel.

Hong Kong Blind Union always encourages our members to overcome the difficulties of visual impairment, to travel and explore the world independently. With the efforts of us and everyone in the society, we can step further to promote accessible transportation and tourism. Flying aboard is a common mean of travel, and visually impaired people should be able to travel wherever they wish. We hope to see more visually impaired individuals freely traveling in places of the world. We appreciate the great courage and perseverance of Jennifer. She overcame the difficulties and stood strong. Let's learn from Jennifer and remember "Visual impairment limits your eyesight but not your vision".

The Newly Blind feel stronger with the White Cane

By Daniel Chou

Interviewees: Yan (social worker) and Wing (member of the Hong Kong Blind Union)

Wing undergoes eye examinations every year for regular check-ups since he was diagnosed with Glaucoma eight years ago. Over a year ago, he took the doctor's suggestion underwent a cataract surgery. Wing was hopeful until he faced post-operation complications. After the surgery, he suffered from ocular hypertension and optic nerve injury, eventually resulting in total vision loss in his left eye and only a faint vision remaining in his right eye. Wing never expected that the surgery would be a tragic for him as the breadwinner of his family.

Wing felt hopeless when he first lost his sight, isolating himself at home. Wing's wife kept him company while he was healing from the trauma and walking out from the shadow. "I am lucky to have my wife by my side, taking care of me with encouragement. Also, I was referred to join the Hong Kong Blind Union. Wing initially joined the support group for the newly blind to minimize his idle time at home where met a group of peers. He used to feel miserable and fought his battle alone before joining the group. Fortunately, he gained encouragement and motivation from group mates. There were two visually impaired mentors who always share their experiences with the team, such as how to navigate smartphones by using auditory cues. "Mentors are my role models. They taught me that visually impaired people can also live independently, with other senses but vision. I can enjoy my favourite movies through audio description" Wing explained. Now, Wing is passionate about experiencing his life using multiple senses, namely hearing, taste, and touch.

The Hong Kong Blind Union celebrates International White Cane Day every year by organizing a flagship event to promote social inclusion, and to recognize the white cane as the significant tool that allows the visually impaired people to live independently. This year, Wing and 30 members from the group of newly blind stepped out of their comfort zones and participated in the charity walk. From Wan Chai to the Central Market, they left their footprint in the community with a 3.5 km walk. Self-affirmation is the important takeaway for his participation. The white cane is a symbol of self-reliance and accomplishment. With the white cane, Wing was able to participate in social activities as a citizen, just like others, but not a forgotten minority in need.

We have always been committed to providing adaptation services for newly visually impaired people, helping them overcome the obstacles arising from visual impairment, rebuild confidence, and integrate into the community. There are more and more newly blind people in our society, and most of them are waiting for a vacancy in rehabilitation classes, which often takes 12 to 16 months waiting. Due to the pandemic, Wing had to wait for a year and a half. "I am now doing well in the rehabilitation class. Before joining the class, I received great support from the HKBU. The life skills training includes mobility training and the use of a cane. I have gained a solid foundation in

preparation for my rehabilitation class."

Yan, the social worker responsible for the newly blind services, said, "Our service group fills the gap between people in need and the community resources. We offer care, encouragement, and emotional support on the dark days when a service user is trying to accept eye-sight deterioration. With our accompaniment and training, they stay connected to society. Even simple training like grocery shopping can gradually rebuild their confidence and alleviate the burden on their families." She continued, "On top of the training, the sharing provided by visually impaired peers is an essential part of the adaptation services because they may not feel understood by the sighted. Therefore, members who have graduated from the training are happy to share their experiences. This heartfelt sharing is encouraging and fully demonstrates our spirit of self-help and mutual support." The meaning of life is infinite and boundless. With limited resources, we have yet to be able to provide supportive services to every newly blind individual. We are making the most of our resources and hoping to extend our services to more unseen minorities, empowering more visually impaired people in need.

Activities Review

29th October, 2023

Service Centre 45th Anniversary Opening Ceremony

Service Centre (SC) was established in 1978, has been providing various services to assist the visually impaired persons (VIPs) in living independently and integrating into society. These services include recreational activities, personal life adaptation, adaptation for the newly blind, and caregiver support. The SC underwent renovations from October 2022 and resumed operations in June of this year. To commemorate the 45th anniversary, we invited various guests, including representatives from the Social Welfare Department and the Union's supporters, to attend the opening ceremony. Apart from the ceremony, we also set up a feature wall displaying photos from the past 45 years; a blindfold experiential workshop, and a Coffee Corner hosted by the visually impaired baristas. We shared the fruitful achievements of the past 45 years with our esteemed guests on that day.

5th September, 2023

Seeing Joy In Music Concert 2023

Many visually impaired persons are passionate about music and have great talent. However, they often encounter difficulties and challenges on their learning journey. Recognizing this, in 2021, the Union received funding from the Arts Development Fund for Persons with Disabilities of the Social Welfare Department. We launched the "Seeing Joy In Music" music program and recruited 12 visually impaired members with musical potential and enthusiasm to receive professional music training and support. Now in its third year, we organized the "Seeing Joy In Music Concert 2023" on September 5th to allow the participants to showcase their achievements over the past three years.

21st October, 2023

"Dik Dik's Diary" Book Sharing by Radio Host Alton Yu

Radio host Alton Yu, along with his program producer Kit, recently visited our service centre to share his new book, "Dik Dik's Diary," with our members. During the event, Alton played audio excerpts of selected chapters from the book and shared personal anecdotes with the members. He also generously gave away the book with his autograph. The participants were thrilled and touched.

21st to 24th October, 2023

The 4th Asian Para Games Hangzhou

In collaboration with the Hong Kong Olympic Lions Club, we organized a team of 29 people to participate in the 4th Asian Para Games held in Hangzhou. The trip included

attending the opening ceremony, watching women's wheelchair basketball games, and meeting with the local visually impaired organization. We were also fortunate to provide audio description services for a major multi-sport event for the first time. We hope to continue travelling outside Hong Kong with the visually impaired members and enjoy more exciting competitions in the future.

23rd to 26th August, 2023

Taiwan Exchange Tour

The Jockey Club Vocational and Educational Resources Centre, together with 14 visually impaired members, formed a Taiwan exchange group and traveled to Taipei City to learn about the supports provided to the visually impaired persons in education, career planning, and employment. They also visited several visually impaired organizations, including the Taiwan Foundation for the Blind, Institute for the Blind of Taiwan, and Taipei Parents' Association for the Visually Impaired. Through these visits, they gained further insights into the local support for the visually impaired, aiming to explore possibilities for visual impairment services in Hong Kong.