

NCBI News

Volume 13 No. 1. Spring 2010

Incorporating *The Blind Citizen* (1923)

Ice Cold in Drumcondra



A chilly return to work greeted NCBI head office staff with the Pringle memorial fountain stilled in its candelabra of pendent icicles.

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Software can aid those who have trouble reading standard size text.



Family therapy aids those affected by sight loss.



The Haiti disaster draws us to think of those who face a tragic 2010.

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Publisher: NCBI
NCBI NEWS (Incorporating The Blind Citizen 1923) is published four times a year by: NCBI,
Whitworth Road, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.
Tel: 01 830 7033 Fax: 01 8307 787
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Printed by: Future Print
Tel: 01 8399800.

NCBI is a registered Charity,
registered in Ireland No. 26293
Charity No. CHY 4626

SIGHTLINES

Acts of God

Happy New Year to all our readers. 2010 got off to a difficult start for many, with snow and ice making travel dangerous, and often impossible. However, it was a good time for us all to remember those around us who need our support, whether it be bringing food to those who were house-bound due to bad weather, or simply remembering to call on neighbours who live alone to offer some company. We have also gone from the extreme of flooding late last year to severe water shortages around the country, which are likely to continue for some months to come.

However, when we look at what people in the Caribbean country of Haiti are going through following a devastating earthquake, the true horror of which is still not known, we must remember to count our blessings when at all possible.

In a country as poor as Haiti, where three out of four people live on less than \$2 per day and children regularly die from simple lack of food, people with disabilities are

truly on the bottom rung of the ladder. According to the Christian Blind Mission, which worked with around 5,000 people with disabilities in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince before January's earthquake, people with disabilities are often the first to die in disasters like this. Those who survive find it difficult to access relief aid and are very vulnerable to the disaster's aftermath.

Thankfully a number of Irish and international aid organisations are in place to help Haitians in Port-au-Prince to recover from this dreadful tragedy. In the aftermath of a disaster survival is the key and the needs being met will be the most basic, with the emphasis on medical attention, food, shelter, water and sanitation but as development work continues over the coming years we hope that these agencies will be able to improve the lives of people with disabilities in one of the world's poorest countries. ■

Obituary of Mr Henry Tierney by NCBI Chairman

It was with great sadness that I learnt of the death of Henry Tierney, our late Chairman. I had known him for many years, during which time he had become a dear friend as well as a highly esteemed colleague.

Henry was a caring and kind person and his years of dedication and long commitment to NCBI have left the organisation far richer and stronger. NCBI has benefited immensely from his wisdom and guidance. The growth and development of our work meant a great deal to him and we shall deeply miss his presence.

We extend our sincerest condolences to his wife, Rosemary, and his three sons, Richard, David and Henry.

On a personal note, I would like to say that I am honoured to follow in his footsteps as Chairman and I shall miss him greatly.

Margaret McDowell,
Chairperson. ■



Henry Tierney, left, pictured with former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern at a presentation in May 2008 when he thanked Henry for his many years of service to NCBI.

Henry was elected to serve on the NCBI Executive on March 8th 1955. He attended his first executive meeting on April 12th 1955. In that long 54 years of service Henry worked assiduously to further the work of NCBI. He was central to the planning of the proposed National Centre for the Blind at Rathmines in 1979-80 which was reneged on by the then Minister for Health.

Following this major set back, Henry was also central to NCBI being nominated as the recipients of The National Milk Run in 1982, a sum which was later to enable NCBI to purchase the old Drumcondra Hospital, which he personally surveyed for its new Headquarters. Over the years he had invested personal time and expertise in furthering the aims and values of NCBI and he is unique for the long years of service which he gave. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a ainm usual. ■

NEWS Snippets

Website links to text-only news online

Francis Kane, an NCBI community resource worker has set up a website which provides direct links to text-only versions of news, newspaper and magazine websites, along with direct links to listen to radio stations from Ireland and abroad. It has also links to TV listings, along with some other links that may be of interest.

“It’s a very straightforward way for someone with a vision impairment to access the internet for information of that type, particularly if they are new internet users. Hopefully it will encourage people to explore the internet more, once they have the confidence to navigate around this site,” according to Francis.

The website can be accessed at <http://easylinks.yolasite.com/> ■

Household budgeting service

Over 750,000 people who are paid their weekly social

welfare payment through the post office can now avail of a service that gives easy-pay options for household bills.

Under the scheme, customers can commit a fixed amount of their weekly social welfare payment towards any number of utility bills, including ESB, Bord Gaís, Eircom and Local Authority rents or mortgages. This service was previously available for jobseekers and lone parents who were being paid through their social services card. However with the recent move of all State pensioners, carers and widows onto the electronic system, many more people can now use it.

Minister Mary Hanafin said the Department intends to extend the facility to a range of other telecoms and utility providers and to introduce additional services over time. “Knowing that regular payments are going towards the electricity, heating or rent can relieve a lot of pressure on families and individuals as they seek to manage their money. An Post operates a network of over 1,200 post offices throughout the country, so this service is very accessible for all social welfare customers”, said Minister Hanafin.

To find out more about this service contact An Post on **1800 70 71 72** or visit <http://tinyurl.com/yfyawp6> . ■

European Blind Union launches the 2010 Braille Contest

The European Blind Union has launched the European strand of the Fourth Onkyo International Braille Essay Contest. This is a worldwide initiative planned and sponsored by Onkyo and by the Braille Mainichi, two Japanese firms actively engaged in the promotion of Braille.

Through personal experience, contestants will tell how Braille has empowered them and improved their daily lives. Over the last three years the Onkyo contest has been met with great enthusiasm by European braille users:

“When I started learning Braille, I felt as though I was walking through the wide open doors of the world” (Milan Duric of Serbia).

“Louis Braille has eased my breathing, taught me to walk, to feel for and step over the

stones... praise him!" (Antonio Martín Figueroa of Spain).

These are but a few quotes from essays contributed in previous contests showing how much the blind feel indebted towards Louis Braille and his wonderful reading and writing system.

Information on the theme of the competition and the submission deadline are not yet available, please keep an eye on our website for further details www.ncbi.ie . ■

Public consultation on problems with air travel regulation

The European Commission has opened a public consultation process to gather stakeholders' opinion on existing problems and preferred solutions to assess the quality and effectiveness of the implementation and enforcement of air passengers' rights legislation.

You will find the documents on the website, if you would like to submit your opinions and experiences: <http://tinyurl.com/y8jr23e>

Knitting up a storm

Joan Truss, from Castlemaine in Kerry kindly donated €70 to NCBI recently, having sold some of her beautiful, hand-knitted dolls. These dolls require a huge amount of work and concentration and Joan is currently working on more, which she also hopes to sell for NCBI. Joan has age related macular degeneration but recently started to knit again after a seven-year break from the hobby. We would like to extend our thanks to Joan for her hard work and kind donation. ■



some examples of Joan's intricate knitted dolls.

New Clear Print Mark



Clear Print Approved
www.ncbi.ie

NCBI Media Centre has launched its new clear print mark and advisory service. The aim of the quality mark is to acknowledge public and private organisations that use clear print design in their printed information. Clear print is a design principle that makes printed information easier to read for everyone, particularly for people with sight problems.

To achieve this quality mark, public and private organisations will submit documents to NCBI's Media Centre, who will advise on the accessibility of the document and recommend changes which will make it easier to read. There is a charge for this service and organisations who comply will be awarded the clear print quality mark shown above.

Please contact the Library on 01 8642266 for any enquiries about this new service. ■

Employment

Huge gaps still exist in employment of people with disabilities

Unemployment is a hot topic in the current climate, with job losses announced every week. But even during the boom years, people with disabilities were facing high unemployment rates and people with vision impairments are now facing even greater difficulties in finding employment. What are the barriers faced by blind and vision impaired people and what can be done to overcome them?

Equality legislation at national and European level promotes the employment of people with disabilities and prevents discriminatory practices amongst employers. However, a report published late last year by the National Disability Authority shows that almost half of public bodies are failing to meet the target for employing people with disabilities. In 2008 the number of public sector employees who declared a disability was 6,083, a rise of 204 on the number reported in 2007 and all 15 Government departments met the 3% target. Yet four out of five blind people are likely to be out of work so it is clear that gaps remain but where are those gaps? Are they in the education and training of people with sight loss, in encouraging employers to hire people who are blind and vision impaired by showing them what support is available or is it that the legislation is not being enforced? NCBI's Policy Advisor Gordon Dryden tells us more.

Employment is problematic for any person with a disability but raises some specific issues in relation to vision impairment. For example, there can be a period of 6-12 months after traumatic sight loss when adjustment to daily living needs makes it difficult for a person to address employment issues. There is also evidence that after two years out of the labour market, re-entry to employment is very difficult, which leaves a very narrow period of optimum opportunity for re-introduction to the labour market.

Two out of three people with vision impairments are likely to be unemployed. This figure is even higher for people who are completely blind, rising to four out of five people. Static figures that seem to imply no change in employment patterns may simply disguise improved employment for young people, who have been well supported in education, balancing worsening employment for older people with fewer qualifications.

Disclosing a disability

Employees may find it difficult to disclose their sight loss, especially if the loss of vision is gradual. This may lead to delays in getting the necessary assistance, making employment retention even more difficult.

Sometimes people do not disclose their vision problems because they attribute some degree of sight loss to their age and may not recognise that



Career directions: What career routes are open to people with vision impairments?

their problems are worse than other people's. It may also be a reluctance to admit to having problems with work; a tendency that is likely to increase in the present economic climate. Timely intervention is important to support retention because once contact with the workplace is lost, regaining employment is very difficult.

It is important to recognise that there are genuine problems created by sight loss which impact on the ability to do a job. The first practical problem is mobility. Simply getting to work when transport is poor can be extremely difficult. Mobility skills, like using a long cane, may take a long time to acquire.

In a changing environment, sight loss, which makes carrying out daily tasks difficult and limits independence, inevitably tends to undermine the

confidence of a vision impaired person, especially a newly vision impaired person. The self confidence of individuals is one of the major factors in determining whether or not they are able to hold down a job or even engage seriously in re-training as a basis for re-entering the labour market.

The relationship between employment and loss of benefits can be quite confusing for people who are currently in receipt of Government benefits and can act as a deterrent to seeking employment. It is important that there is more clarity about the system and that people with disabilities see the financial benefits of returning to work.

Encouraging employers

Employers and co-workers anxieties about the ability of a vision impaired person to cope and the increased demands it may place on managers and other employees can make continuing employment or re-introduction to the workplace difficult for people who are experiencing sight loss.

Most employers are unaware of the funding that is available to support the employment of people with disabilities. This lack of awareness has had a negative impact on the willingness of employers to adopt appropriate job retention measures. Similarly, most individuals in employment with a developing disability are unaware of the support available.

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Employment

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On a more positive note, young people who have been well supported in education are more likely to progress to employment. For this to continue, it is essential that blind and vision impaired children have equal access to mainstream education.

Disability Act

According to the 2002 Census, there are 78,000 people with disabilities in employment but the concern among disability organisations is that this figure is not made up of people with significant disabilities. A more worrying fact is that the employment of people with disabilities actually decreased during the boom years of 2002-2004. So it is clear that a lot of work needs to be done to address the supply and demand of people with disabilities who are ready to enter employment.

Last year the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment completed a public consultation process on the review of its Sectoral Plan, as required under the 2005 Disability Act, to which NCBI made a submission. It is good to see that Government departments and other public bodies are keen to establish links with user groups representing people with disabilities and the next steps will be to secure more progress in getting these views taken on board.

NCBI's employment services



NCBI's employment advisor, Denis Daly, provides advice on careers, third level education, mainstream services, training opportunities, job seeking, interview skills as well as assistance with application procedures and can assist you in working towards these goals.

As well as providing advice on employment and training to service users and external service providers, the employment service liaises with the technology advisors in identifying a range of assistive technology to suit your needs. Software which can enlarge print on a computer screen or read aloud what is on the screen. Scanners that can transfer printed material onto your PC and closed circuit televisions (CCTVs) that may enable you to read memos, books and fill out forms.

NCBI also actively works with employers with on-site visits to outline the adaptations that can be made in the workplace to accommodate people with sight loss and assist in the retention of these employees.

Advice is also provided on the grants that are available and to raise awareness with these employers of the capabilities of people with sight loss, whether recently acquired or already existing in their employment.

Roslyn's Personal Point of View

Roslyn Allman, 24, from Portarlington graduated from Waterford Institute of Technology with a degree in Legal and Business Studies in 2007. Here she outlines her experiences of looking for employment.

NCBI's employment support services can assist you in preparation for job seeking or with advice on your assistive technology requirements.



"I spent 12 months job-hunting after college. Personally I prefer to disclose my disability in a job application but that is up to everyone to decide for themselves. I found that if I didn't and I was called for an interview, I could sense an uncomfortable feeling in the room when the interviewers realised that I have a disability and it is difficult to continue with the interview. However, I do feel that employers are still reluctant to call people with sight loss for interview. In spite of that I would still prefer to disclose it sooner rather than later, if they don't want me because of my vision impairment then I don't want to work there anyway.

"I got in touch with Denis (in NCBI's employment service) when I was finished college and did some interview skills and techniques with him. I found that very useful and it helped to put me at ease during interviews. Denis also

helped me tailor my CV for different jobs.

"In October 2008 I took part in the WAM (Willing Able Mentoring) Programme with AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability. Through this programme, which is aimed at graduates with disabilities, I started work experience with Microsoft for six months. It was a great way to gain experience, not only professionally but also personally. Once you start in the workplace you work in a mainstream environment but there is support there from WAM if you feel you need it and you have a mentor whom you can liaise with as often as you need.

"I am now job-hunting again and it's even more difficult now as there are so many people in the same boat. I don't feel that having a vision impairment restricts the number or type of jobs that I can apply for. I apply for what

I am qualified to do. It is hard but you have to keep trying; employers are not going to come looking for you. My priority at the moment is to get more work experience. I think it's really important to show employers what you have worked on and the results of that work; that is my focus when I'm looking for a job".

You can contact AHEAD on **01 77164396** or www.ahead.ie.

Find out more
To find out more about the employment support service contact us on 1850 33 43 53 or talk to your local community resource worker. ■

Sight Loss and You

Emotional rollercoaster – coming to

NCBI News often brings you news of practical products and developments that can make life easier for people who are blind or vision impaired. But what about the emotional issues that people face when coming to terms with reduced vision?

This area is a huge focus of NCBI's work with people with vision impairments, as people deal with sight loss at different stages of their lives. Here we look at some of the difficulties that people have and the support that is available.

Rosemary Smyth, who has one prosthetic eye and a macular hole in the other, which has the same effect as age-related macular degeneration, talks about her personal experience of sight loss.

"I'm 71 now and this happened to me in my early 50s. I found it very difficult to cope. You realise that there are so many things you can no longer do and you feel very much alone. In the beginning my family were inclined to forget that I couldn't see very much and it was difficult for them to understand. On the outside I looked the same and my eyes looked perfectly normal so it was hard for them to figure out what I could and couldn't see. But time made it easier for us all," explains Rosemary.

Sight loss obviously has a profound affect on the person themselves but it can also upset the entire family dynamic, as **Caimin Fox**, NCBI's family therapist, explains.

"Sight loss can shatter somebody's self image and sense of themselves. It can also change roles within a family or partnership. For example, someone who was working fulltime and providing for their family financially may suddenly find themselves at home full-time. This in itself can be a huge role change but if their partner, out of concern and a desire to help, is inclined to take over their various roles within the home, then it can leave the

person feeling that they are no longer contributing to their family, and this can generate a sense of worthlessness. Meanwhile their partner may be unsure of what is expected of them or how best to support their partner."

Rosemary says that the attitudes of friends and family can have a big impact on the person dealing with sight loss. "You notice a difference in how your family treats you and in how other people treat you. When I first registered as blind some people backed away when I had expected support. I was very surprised by the reactions of some people around me. I didn't want them to take over but I did need support with certain things until I found out how to do things myself, which I did in time."

Christine Maxwell, from **Féach**, a support group set up in 1994 for parents of children with vision impairments, says that it can take some people years to even be able to talk about sight loss in the family.

"We find that some parents want to talk at an early stage and find out all they can straight away but for others it can take four or five years before they get to the stage where they are ready to talk about it," Christine explains.

Christine has first-hand experience of coming to terms with sight loss, as her son Luke has a vision impairment. "When my son Luke was diagnosed 23 years ago I was devastated. I was more devastated for me than I was for him at the time. I couldn't understand why this happened to us. Luke was premature and in hospital for about 10 or 12 weeks. We were told about all the other medical complications but nobody ever mentioned his eyes. When I was sent to a specialist I went on my own, I didn't realise what I was going to be told and there was no support offered whatsoever after the diagnosis. We were just sent on our way and there was no back up. It was a year or two before I could really talk about it. I had a lot of friends who had

terms with sight loss

babies around the same time and I just kept asking 'why our family'."

Caimin has also found that people come to NCBI for counselling and support at different stages in their vision loss. "People who have a tendency to be proactive may come to us sooner but others may wait until things get too much for them and they really need to talk to someone. Whatever stage the person is at in relation to their sight loss, I find that counselling tends to work best when the individual themselves recognises a need for it, rather than when someone tells them they need it." Although individuals attend NCBI's family therapy service on their own, it is referred to as family therapy because it takes a systemic perspective, with Caimin looking at how the vision loss affects everyone involved – the individual, their spouse or partner and any children or siblings.

"My challenge is to connect with the person or family that comes through my door and to try to understand with them what their experience of sight loss is. Every individual's and every family's experience will be different. I try to explore and uncover the resources that already exist within the person themselves and within their relationships with family and friends, that may help the person to adjust to their sight loss and prevent it from dominating their lives. The best piece of advice I can give to families and friends is to listen to the individual who is experiencing sight loss. Don't try to take over, or second guess what they need, ask them, and talk about it. Encourage the person to be as independent as they can be, based on their own situation."

Encouraging independence is also something stressed by Christine Maxwell and Rosemary Smyth.

"It is very difficult to let your child go and have some independence but it is really important to tell them that they can do anything. Obviously you don't want them to come to any harm but some



Family therapy looks at the entire family dynamic and how everyone has been affected by sight loss within the family.



Talking to others in the same situation can help with coming to terms with sight loss.

parents can be over anxious and that passes on to the child. Our attitude was to let Luke try anything he wanted. He was the goalie on the hockey team for a while and my heart was in my mouth watching him but he was fine. We never told him he couldn't do something if he wanted to try it. We (**Féach**) are taking a group of children skiing in Austria this weekend. It's really character building and it's great for the children to do things that other, so-called 'normal' children can do," according to Christine.

Rosemary has found new interests following her sight loss. "I used to read avidly but I had to find books on tape and learn how to use them".

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Emotional rollercoaster – coming to terms with sight loss

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Some people never get used to audio books because it is such a different experience to picking up a book and reading it yourself. I have found plenty of things that I enjoy but it takes perseverance and discipline.”

“I started painting on silk, which I really enjoy. I also started to play outdoor bowls and really surprised myself by being good at that! I have done a peer counselling course and learned to use computers through that. It has been fantastic as it allows me to keep in touch with friends from around the world. I have also done writing courses too. I understand how difficult it is for many older people to take up new things though and it is often even more difficult for people living in rural areas, as they find it hard to get around.”

Finding support

When someone is diagnosed with an eye condition the focus tends to be on the medical side of things and the treatment options that are available. However, if treatment is no longer an option, or the person’s level of vision has begun to affect their daily lives, it can be difficult to find out what support, either practical or emotional, is available. “We have seen people who have been told by their ophthalmologist that they are going blind and there is nothing more that can be done for them from a medical point of view, but they are not given any more information and they don’t know where to go. They can feel very

lost,” according to Caimin.

Féach

Féach was set up because of a lack of available peer support for parents of children with vision impairments, as Christine explains. “I think that talking to other parents in the same situation can benefit a family hugely. It’s nice to be able to bounce off another parent in a similar situation and find out if your child is meeting their milestones, or even to talk about medical issues without the jargon. Often parents have no idea where to go. There is a lack of communication with and between service providers for children, such as in education for example, when really we should all be working together to make sure each child has what they need. We work very closely with NCBI’s community resource workers and they have been brilliant. Féach was set up as a support group but has since become a lobbying group as well and we have fought on different issues like education and also getting the companion free-travel pass for children”.

MIST

Rosemary Smyth set up a support group for people with macular degeneration, called MIST, 11 years ago, having found it difficult to find people in a similar situation to herself to talk to.

“There was a group in the UK but there wasn’t anything offering peer support here at the time. People who join MIST are looking for support but also use it as a social

outlet. People who are diagnosed with macular degeneration feel they are on their own, they don’t know that other people also have the same condition. It is good to realise that you are not alone and to find people who understand what you are going through. We offer peer support at the meetings and also try to introduce people living in the same area. A lot of great friendships have been made out of it,” according to Rosemary.

Contact details

NCBI’s family therapy service offers people an opportunity to talk with a professionally trained therapist about their sight loss, its impact on themselves, their families and their relationships, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future. The service is free and available in Dublin to individuals or families. For more information contact **Caimin Fox or speak to a community resource worker on 1850 33 43 53.**

Féach meets once a month during the school term and parents are welcome to come along to those meetings. There is also a discussion forum on the website www.feach.ie. **Contact Chairperson Christine Maxwell on 086 3640233 to find out more.**

MIST meets in Dublin and Waterford once a month (except July, August and December). **For more information contact Rosemary Smyth on 01 2809895 or Kate Mahon (for Waterford group) on 051 857795. ■**

Equal Status or What?

Give me Light

When restaurant staff broke Equality Law by refusing to provide enough light for Zehanne Kenny to read the menu two years ago, she decided to take legal action.

The issue

I am partially sighted and have always found it difficult to find restaurants with enough lighting for me to be able to read the menu. So I was delighted to find a place that seemed ideal, Sufi's Café, on St Stephen's Green in Dublin, and I soon became a regular customer. Sufi's had a dimmer switch arrangement which allowed a section of the seating area to be brightened up on request. Once I had explained to the management about my poor eyesight, they had been happy to oblige.

One night, all this changed. I went into Sufi's Café and asked for the lighting dimmer to be altered and was told, "No, other customers have been complaining". I responded: "Okay, that's fine, but could you just put a small lamp on the table for me please?" I was shocked by the response: "No! We don't have lamps and we checked the legal position, we don't have to cater for your needs."

I explained that, under the Equal Status Act, they did in fact have to do all that was reasonable to

cater for my needs, or those of any disabled customer. The waiter responded with "Write to the owner!". So I said, "I've a better idea – I'll bring the matter before the Equality Tribunal!"

The action

I went to the Equality Tribunal website first, and that gave me information on the procedure I had to follow. One month after setting the wheels in motion, Sufi's and I agreed to mediation. Although this mediation worked, Sufi's failed to keep to it, and this meant the case had to be assigned to an Equality Officer for judgement.

It takes up to three years before your case comes up. Finally, the date of the case hearing arrived and I went to the Tribunal's offices, in Clonmel Street, Dublin, accompanied by my advocate. No one from Sufi's turned up, but The Equality Officer decided to go ahead and hear my evidence. I then had to wait a few weeks for the judgement to be given".

The outcome

"A few weeks later, a letter stating that the judgement was given in my favour arrived – Sufi's were to pay me €250 and to ensure their staff received training in disability awareness.

However, many weeks passed

(well over the 40 days allowed for the losing side to appeal the case) and nothing happened. I phoned the Tribunal and was told that they only make judgements, they don't enforce them. It was never about money, it was the principle – Sufi's blatantly broke the law and thought nothing of it, so I felt I had to keep fighting.

"I began the process of taking them to the circuit court. The day before I was due to meet a lawyer and make an affidavit, a letter arrived from the Equality Tribunal enclosing a cheque from Sufi's for €250.

Reflections

"I learnt that the Equality Tribunal is not fully effective. A body that cannot enforce judgements seems pretty limited. It's not enough to just take a case and let it run its course, you (we – the entire disabled community) need to be prepared to follow it through.

"Rather than being discouraged, this entire episode has convinced me that work needs to be done by everyone who is dissatisfied with the 'inclusion in theory but exclusion in practice' ethos which prevails".

Zehanne Kenny is a Research Assistant in the English Department at Trinity College, Dublin. ■

Booting Up

Computer workshops provide new lease

Computer workshops run in NCBI's Clondalkin and Dun Laoghaire offices are giving people living in Kildare, South Dublin and Wicklow the opportunity to learn computer skills at their own pace and also provide a great social outlet for those who take part.

The workshops, which are suitable for beginners, cover topics such as touch typing, creating documents, sending emails and accessing the internet. Weekly classes last for an hour and a half, including evening and Saturday slots. The workshops run for around 8-10 weeks. There are around three to five people in each workshop, depending on the number of computers and tutors available.

Tailored to each individual

According to Sharon Lyons, an IT Trainer based in Clondalkin, the classes are unique because they are tailored to each individual. "The teaching in the workshops is based on the EATT (Equal Access to Technology Training) Introductory IT Course. But there are no set lessons or exams. People work at their own pace and choose what they would like to try out from week to week. We provide computers and software but people are welcome to bring their own laptops if they prefer. All different assistive software users are catered for, including users of Jaws, Supernova, Zoomtext and Guide.

"The computer workshops started in Summer 2006 in NCBI Dun Laoghaire. Then, thanks to a lottery grant, we were able to get some computers and software in NCBI Clondalkin and the workshops started there a year later. We have seen demand increase, as more people are referred from their community resource worker, so we have a waiting list at the moment. The workshops are open to

people with a vision impairment of all ages, but are mostly attended by adults. The workshops give an introduction to computers and are a good basis for further classes and home learning. People who have attended say that they now feel confident to try new things on their own at home."

'No way! That's not for me!'

One course participant, Sheila Baldwin, from Terenure, would recommend the classes to people of all ages and abilities. "I found the beginners' workshop fantastic. I actually came across it by accident. I went to NCBI to enquire about magnification as I was finding it more and more difficult to see print and when I was there Sharon showed me around and asked if I had any interest in learning computer skills. My first thought was 'No way! That's not for me!', but she asked if I would give it a try and I'm so delighted that I did," explains Sheila.

"I attended some of the first workshops held in Clondalkin. I am still at basic level as it was all new to me when I started. Not only that, but I couldn't see the keys or the screen so I had to learn touch typing and use screen reading software for the first time. I'm 78 and I can understand why people do not want to learn how to use a computer later in life but it has really opened up a whole new world for me. My daughter is on holidays in Australia at the moment and we are emailing each other every day, which saves a lot on telephone bills and is also very enjoyable for both of us. I have recommended the course to others and spoke about it at MIST meetings (support group for people with age-related macular degeneration). It's also a great social outlet and I looked forward to meeting people each week. So I would urge people to give it a go," continued Sheila.

of life for many

There is also a computer club that meets in Newbridge and is run by people in the area who have vision impairments.

In Dublin, the computer workshops are free, but transport to and from the NCBI office is not provided. Workshops are currently running from the beginning of February but are full. The next set starts after Easter. Anyone interested in signing up for the computer workshops should contact Sharon Lyons in NCBI Clondalkin on **01 4056950** or email sharon.lyons@ncbi.ie or John Lynch in NCBI Dun Laoghaire on **01 2710120** or email john.lynch@ncbi.ie to find out more.

Similar NCBI computer workshops are available in other parts of the country. Workshops run regularly in the Midlands, Cork and South East regions and are based on demand in other areas. Contact your local IT trainer or community resource worker on **1850 33 43 53** for more information. ■



Software can enlarge everything on the screen or read aloud what is on the computer screen for those who have trouble reading standard size text.



Sharon Lyons, NCBI's IT Trainer based in Clondalkin.



The original members of the Newbridge computer club L-R: Willie Coffey, Mary Hennessy (co-ordinator Bridge House Project), Betty Joyce, Martin Kelly, Anne Kelly, Bridget O'Rourke, Sharon Lyons (NCBI's IT Instructor), Linda Baldwin and Billy Baldwin.

Barriers to Care

Disaster relief and people with disabilities

On 12th January the Caribbean country of Haiti was hit by an earthquake which devastated the capital city, Port-au-Prince, killing around 150,000 people, although the final numbers are still not known. Rescue and relief efforts began almost immediately, with Irish and international aid agencies providing emergency relief on the ground. At this stage we have seen and heard reports from the country, outlining the scale of this tragedy, but how does a disaster of this magnitude affect people with disabilities, especially in a country as poor as Haiti?

Haiti is one of the least developed countries in the world, with a population of 8.3 million people, three out of four of whom live on less than \$2 per day (just over €1). Children regularly die from simple lack of food and life for the general population is a constant struggle. In this society, people with disabilities are on the bottom rung of the ladder.

“Disasters have a massive and devastating effect on the entire population but people with disabilities are at an even greater disadvantage”, according to Ron Nabors, chief executive of Christian Blind Mission in the US, an organisation which worked with around 5,000 people with disabilities in Haiti’s capital Port-au-Prince, before January’s earthquake.

“The earthquake has been especially devastating to people with disabilities. In disasters like this earthquake, persons with disability are often the first to die. For those who do survive, they most likely have their wheelchairs, canes, and artificial limbs lost or demolished. They are existing in inhumane conditions with limited support from family, church, or community. They will be helpless to provide for themselves, making them highly vulnerable in the disaster’s aftermath, which can

bring infectious diseases and malnutrition. Typically, very little relief aid is accessible to those with disabilities. They often fall to the end of the line for the world’s limited aid response.”

This is no surprise, given the starting point of people with disabilities in developing countries, as outlined in a White Paper on Irish Aid, published in 2006. “People with disabilities are among the most vulnerable or marginalised in developing countries. Disabled children are the least likely to go to school and the mortality rate of children with disabilities in developing countries is comparatively much higher than non disabled children. Much of disability in developing countries is preventable and is closely related to malnutrition, poor sanitation, disease, poverty and conflict.”

Immediately following a disaster the emergency response is in the acute phase, focusing on getting medical attention, food, water, shelter and sanitation to those worst affected. But people with disabilities may find it more difficult to register with emergency relief providers, or may have lost the support needed to access response efforts, leaving them without their basic needs and entitlements.

This problem is only exacerbated in Haiti, where people with disabilities are often shunned and live isolated lives, hidden from mainstream society. According to the Centre for International Rehabilitation Research Information and Exchange, disabilities are thought of as mysterious and dangerous in Haiti.

“Typically, disabilities are perceived as having origins in the interaction of the natural and supernatural worlds, rather than being a medical issue. For example, a disability may be the result of a curse from a lwa who is upset. Disability is a

punishment – a sign that a lwa was not obeyed. While lwa are voodoo in nature, the same type of explanation holds true within the framework of Christianity. Haitian Christians believe that going against God is the same as going against the lwa. God punishes those who do not obey...Most Haitians are afraid of disabilities and are uneasy around people with disabilities, who may be called ‘crazy’, ‘stupid’, or ‘possessed’. They may also be labelled ‘non-functional’ or ‘worthless’.”

Similar barriers

Those working in areas affected by the tsunami in 2006 found that similar barriers existed when it came to helping people with disabilities, as outlined by the International Disability Rights Monitor. In the hardest hit areas of countries affected by the tsunami, people with disabilities fared worse than the rest of the population in terms of survival. In other areas, where fatality rates were lower the situation of people with disabilities tended to be dependent upon identification or registration systems. For example, Thailand maintains a register of people with disabilities and was able to use this to provide appropriate and timely assistance to registered individuals. However, people with disabilities who are outside those formal systems of identification were largely excluded from aid.

In the days and weeks following a disaster like the earthquake in Haiti, when essential infrastructure has been destroyed and the people are living in inhumane conditions, struggling just to survive, it is easy to see how the specific needs of people with disabilities may unintentionally, but also unavoidably in many situations, become secondary to the immediate needs of the wider population. The true extent of the damage to Haiti’s capital and to its population will only become obvious in the coming weeks but it is clear that there will be few people who remain unaffected by this tragedy. ■



The total devastation wreaked by the Earthquake will take years to recover from and an already poverty-stricken people will rely on international aid for many years to come.



An old woman lied on the ground outside a wrecked market. The old and the disabled will fare worse in the aftermath of this magnitude of natural disaster.



An old woman is helped from the rubble of her home by rescuers. She is one of the lucky ones but this is no consolation to the old and disabled people of Haiti who now face disease, homelessness and abject poverty for the years to come.

All pictures GETTY IMAGES: FREDERIC DUPOUX; LISANDRO SUERO/ AFP; DANIEL MOREL/AFP; THONY BELIZAIRE; AFP.

Your EYE Care

Take an active role in protecting your

If you only make and keep one New Year's resolution in 2010, make it this: have your eyes examined this year. Taking an active role in protecting your eyes could help you detect an eye condition before it becomes a problem, making it easier to manage. Think about what you could lose by neglecting your eyes.

According to Lynda McGivney Nolan of the Association of Optometrists Ireland, it is vital to have an eye exam every two years.

"You should have an eye examination every two years. Your spectacles may not need changing or, indeed, you may not even need spectacles at all, but an eye examination will not just evaluate what your vision is like and whether or not you need spectacles, it will also evaluate the health of your eyes. Your optometrist can detect conditions which can threaten your vision such as glaucoma, age related macular degeneration, cataracts, and problems with the back of your eyes relating to health issues such as diabetes and blood pressure. Early detection of any problem with your eyes means early management and treatment which in turn means a better outcome for your vision and eye health," explains Lynda.

"If you wear spectacles, it is important to have the prescription checked every two years. A recent study indicated that one of the leading causes of impaired vision was down to people wearing out-of-date glasses, the wrong glasses and not wearing glasses at all when they needed them. If you drive you have an extra responsibility to ensure that your vision

meets the required standards for driving. Good vision is essential for driving because it not only affects what you are seeing, it affects your responses and your hearing; good vision means you hear better and you react quicker. This makes your driving safer for you and for other road users."

If you hold a medical card or have PRSI you are entitled to a free eye examination every two years. Following changes made in Budget 2010, PRSI employees will no longer be entitled to free glasses or contact lenses under this scheme. Privately, an eye examination will cost you around €35 for a 30-minute examination with a fully trained and qualified professional. If you require further investigative procedures such as dilation, fundus photography, field testing and certain types of glaucoma testing, there may be an extra charge. Your optometrist will discuss this with you should the need arise.

"They say the eyes are the windows to the soul ... but your eyes are also your window to the world around you. An eye examination once every two years can be enough to save your sight and keep your eyes healthy and seeing their best. How important is that?" asks Lynda.

Free eye care

The Health Service Executive (HSE) is obliged to provide optical services free of charge to:

- Medical card holders and their dependants.
- Pre-school children and national school children referred from child health service

eyes



A regular eye test can detect changes to your eyes before you have noticed a problem with your vision.

and school health service examinations.

- People with Hepatitis C who contracted the disease through the use of Human Immunoglobulin-Anti-D or from the receipt within Ireland of any blood product or a blood transfusion and who have a Health Amendment Act Card.

Optical Benefit

This scheme was changed in Budget 2010 and will now be restricted to free eyesight examinations. This means that people who have sufficient PRSI contributions may qualify for a free eye exam only; free spectacles or contact lenses will no longer be available.

Employees

Irish employers are required to provide eye tests for staff that use computers for more than one hour a day. Find out more from the Health and Safety Authority at www.hsa.ie . ■

Special Stories Wins A Silver Moonbeam Award



Left to right: Kate Gaynor, Caroline Carswell (IDK) and Karen Quirke welcome the award.

Irish Deaf Kids (IDK) in conjunction with Irish publishing house, Special Stories Publishing, is delighted to announce that its recent book series, including 'A Birthday for Ben', is the recipient of a silver Moonbeam Book Award. The Moonbeam Awards are intended to bring increased recognition to exemplary children's books and their creators, and are judged by expert panels of youth educators, librarians, booksellers, and book reviewers.

"We are thrilled that our second book series has won a Moonbeam award," says Kate Gaynor, publisher of Special Stories. "Each book features a character with a certain special education need. The Irish Deaf Kids book, 'A Birthday for Ben' is about young children who are deaf or who have hearing issues and is designed to introduce all children, especially those in mainstream school, to children with hearing issues." ■

Parents Please Note

The CARA Adapted Physical Activity Resource Centre and the Institute of Technology Tralee is currently arranging Ireland's first ever Camp Abilities in Killarney, Co. Kerry. Camp Abilities is a residential recreational camp for children with vision impairments and will run from the 5th-8th of April 2010.

The aim of the camp is to empower participants with sensory impairments to be physically active within their schools, communities and society in general. The camp is open to 8-14-year-olds.

If you have a child who is interested, please contact Niamh Daffy in the Cara APA centre on 066 714 5646 for more information. ■

ARTs VIEW

Escape into Sound

A unique exhibition of tactile and sound art by a group of new artists who all have vision impairments went on display at the Dublin Art Mill last November and December — this was the culmination of a project begun by artist Siobhan Clancy and a group from NCBI’s Iona Centre in Dublin, over 12 months ago.

The work on show included 3-dimensional sculpture, sound art installations and an audio-visual documentary on the creative process. All the sculptural artworks are tactile and visitors were invited to touch them. The exhibition was opened by Pádraig Naughton, artist and Director of Arts and Disability Ireland.

The project began over 12 months ago when artist Siobhán Clancy began working with a group at NCBI’s Iona Centre, an activity centre for adults who are blind or vision impaired. For the project participants, this was the first time they had engaged in the development, production and exhibition of art in a contemporary context. Until then, most felt that their sight loss left art out of their reach, as one participant outlines: “I discovered that I’m capable of being an artist. I don’t mean I’m going to be one, but I never thought it was something I could do or that you wouldn’t have to have perfect vision to be an artist,” said Lorraine Donegan.

Developing an artistic experience that appealed to multiple senses



Shane Byrne (NCBI service user and project participant) and Anne Walsh (artist) chatting at the exhibition in front of Interactive Soundwalk.

was a fundamental element of the project, according to Clancy. “Very soon into the project, the group and I found that we shared a common interest in artwork that is tactile, engaging and interactive on a sensory as well as an intellectual level. We also discovered a mutual dislike for ‘Do Not Touch’ signs in galleries! So from the outset, we were determined to get our hands dirty and we explored a wide variety of materials and methods of 3-dimensional art making, including clay modelling, paint, plaster casting, alginate mould-making, wax casting, paper and card sculpture and sound production including recording, mixing, audio description and live transmission.”

Lorraine Donegan who has lived with sight loss since birth was surprised by how engaging creating art became. “I have tunnel vision. I didn’t expect this side of art so I was

pleasantly surprised that I could do things with my hands. Every time I see a sculpture now I have to go over and check it out. It’s a whole new learning process for me and I’m enjoying every minute of it.”

Shane Byrne, a participant with a degenerative genetic eye condition remarked now the experience sparked other interests. “It has renewed my interest in other things as well. I’ve been to visit more galleries since I started. Every time I go to a new city, I look through the paper for exhibitions that might be on whilst I’m there. It made sense that an exhibition formed a natural conclusion to our project. **Escape into Sound** presents the highlights of the artistic voyage we made together.”

The exhibition, which was launched in November, complete with wine reception and Braille cookies, was a

wonderful occasion for celebration. Speakers on the night included Pádraig Naughton, Elaine Howley (NCBI Director of Services) and Elaine Crossan (Manager NCBI Iona Centre). Participants were awarded framed editions of the **Escape into Sound** invitation by Siobhán Clancy and special thanks were made to creative collaborators Sven Anderson, Brian Dalton, Josephine May, Anne Walsh, Mark Larkin, John Lawlor and Tara Nichols.

The exhibition ran for six days with guided tours by project participants offered to groups. Among those who availed of this opportunity were staff and service users from NCBI Iona Centre and NCBI Training Centre. St. Joseph's House for Deaf Blind Adults also took advantage of the tactile tour and even produced a plaster cast of their own made from impressions of their hands in clay to commemorate the occasion, facilitated by Siobhan Clancy and participant Shane Byrne.

At the closing talk, participants and artist made a series of presentations on the 'The Art of Listening' project process over the 14-month period that lead to the **Escape into Sound** exhibition at Dublin Art Mill in Dublin 8. Shane Byrne gave an eloquent overview of the experience;

"It was a process of evolution, I really didn't know what to expect. I did think we were going to be doing painting and drawing and it just opened my eyes to the other forms of art that are actually out there and some that I wouldn't have



LEFT: A visitor checks out the interactive Soundwalk at the exhibition.

BELOW: Guided soundwalk kit and umbrella ball.

considered taking part it. The group all had different abilities and we all had different ideas of what art was. It was a journey and it almost fell into place alone. There were different levels of sight loss so 'sound' was something that everyone could participate in."

Pádraig Naughton facilitated discussion on the issues raised with the audience. "From my perspective, running Arts and Disability Ireland, it was a significant achievement and a significant landmark in terms of disabled peoples' engagement in a mainstream event."

To learn more about the project, go to www.theartoflistening.wordpress.com. For a copy of our DVD and Audio CD Presentation Pack featuring audio-visual documentary material and sound works, contact :



ncbilistening@gmail.com

To all the many people at NCBI who contributed time, effort, ideas, energy and support; a heartfelt thanks from all the participants and artists. ■



Event calendar for 2010 share in the unique experiences offered on these NCBI Challenges!

Parachute Jump

Fulfil your dream!

March-September

Phone 01-4525730 or email

parachutejum@eircom.net

NCBI Comedy Night

March 25th

Join us for a laugh in the Laughter Lounge and raise much needed funds for NCBI. Tickets cost €25 and include a free cocktail on arrival, four great comedians, a late bar extension and a D.J. Contact Denise Kenny for more information or to purchase tickets.

The Celtic Tour

May 1st - 3rd

This May bank holiday weekend join the legend that is Billy Shanahan and bike your way around Ireland and Wales on a charity road trip. Find out more at www.bikerschallenge.com. Contact Billy Shanahan on 087 9253225 or email blazingbikers@gmail.com.

Malin to Mizen

May 2010

Challenge yourself this year by cycling from Malin Head to Mizen Head. More Details to follow. Contact Denise Kenny for more information.

Women's Mini Marathon

7th June

For more information on sponsorship cards, t-shirts and support contact Denise Kenny. Keep an eye on the Evening Herald for entry forms as the closing date is the end of April.

Trip to Tipp

July 17th-18th

Join Billy Shanahan and the rest of the gang cycling in beautiful Tipperary for the weekend. For more

information contact Billy Shanahan on 087 9253225 or email blazingbikers@gmail.com.

European Cycle Challenge

September 2010

Challenge yourself this year by cycling from Prague to Vienna. More Details to follow. Contact Denise Kenny for more information.

Holmpatrick Cup 2010

The Holmpatrick Cup will once again see the All Ireland Final Held at St. Andrews in October. Golf clubs throughout Ireland should by now have received details of the 2010 competition, along with entry forms. You could be just three steps away from playing at the home of golf! Talk to your club competition secretary about taking part and entering a date in their 2010 diary for the Holmpatrick Cup. Contact Allison Harvey for more information or to confirm your entry.

Granard Cup 2010

Talk to your club competition secretary about taking part and entering a date in their 2010 diary for the Granard Cup. For more information or to take part in the competition contact the fundraising team directly.

Australia 2010

October

This promises to be a challenging event which will see both our walkers and cyclists join forces again. More details to follow. To register your interest please contact Denise Kenny.

New York Marathon 2010

We are delighted to launch for the first time with NCBI the New York Marathon, taking place on **7th November**. Raise funds and take part in the world's most popular marathon. Call Denise for more information.



Global Challenges

As mentioned in previous issues, NCBI have teamed up with ACARA to offer some exciting treks around the globe. So if you fancy a global challenge contact Denise Kenny or have a look at some of the challenges on offer at www.acara.ie.

Fun Runs and Marathons

Events run all year

Can you go the distance for NCBI? For more information on sponsorship cards, t-shirts and support contact Denise.

Contact details:

LoCall 1850 33 43 53

Denise Kenny: denise.kenny@ncbi.ie

Allison Harvey: allison.harvey@ncbi.ie

For more information on sponsorship cards, t-shirts and support Lo Call 1850 334353.

New Head of Fundraising joins NCBI

NCBI is pleased to announce the appointment of Robert Astick as Head of Fundraising. Robert has 16 years' experience of operating as a campaigns and fundraising manager — much of that time spent as a senior executive with Compton International, a consultancy company advising on and managing fundraising campaigns for third sector agencies.

Robert joined Henshaws Society for Blind People in June 2004 as the Campaign Director for the Henshaws College "Living Life Campaign" aimed at redeveloping residential and teaching accommodation at the College. The Campaign has passed the £5.5 Million raised mark and is fast becoming one of the best known charitable projects in North Yorkshire attracting funding from local, regional and national sources including individuals, Corporates, Trusts and Statutory sources.

From Henshaws, Robert moved to become the Campaign Director for the Royal National College for the Blind "Building Brighter Futures" Fundraising Campaign, based in Hereford. The Campaign involved the creation

of a completely new fundraising arm charged with raising £10,000,000 towards a campus redevelopment project costing £21,500,000.

Robert comes to NCBI from his last employment as Head of Fundraising with the Irish Red Cross, where he instituted a new range of fundraising practices and tools, including events, corporate giving and major gifts. He also restructured the fundraising department at the Irish Red Cross. ■

Irish Blind Sports - Annual May Games 2010

We are pleased to announce that the 30th Annual May Games will take place on Saturday 29th May 2010 at The Morton Stadium, Santry (athletics - track and field) and Aer Lingus Sports Club (ALSAA), Dublin Airport (tenpin bowling, B3/B3 football, tandem cycling and swimming). Participants in all above sports are welcome. For preliminary information on the May Games please contact Kate Dobbyn on **086 2585148** or email katedobbyn@gmail.com All other queries can be sent to info@ibsports.ie or visit www.ibsports.ie. ■

EBU wins the Golden Stars Award

The European Blind Union (EBU) is proud to announce that it has been chosen as one of the winners of the Golden Stars Award of the EU for the project "A Citizens' Europe for All, Disabled People on the Move" Which it has successfully conducted in 2009.

The award ceremony in Brussels provided a further platform to promote the **Dublin Declaration** developed under the winning project. The Declaration highlights fourteen rights that the more than ten million blind and partially sighted citizens of the EU want to enjoy fully.

"This distinction comes at just the right moment to mark the EBU Silver Jubilee and to reward twenty five years of hard work to put an end to discrimination and social exclusion", says Lord Colin Low, President of EBU, who led the delegation at the award ceremony. ■

Mrs Quin's

Goodbye 2009!

2009 was a year to forget as quickly as possible for anyone in business. As well as reduced donations and the return of so many good customers to Eastern Europe, we had to battle the appalling weather, culminating in the record floods in November. The photos were all taken in the vicinity of a Mrs Quin's shop, yet staff and volunteers stayed open as long as it was possible to do so.

The Mrs Quin's shops have proved their worth and managers and volunteers can be proud of their achievement. Extreme conditions bring out the best in people and that was proved over and over. Gort probably fared worst, with the manager having to be taken home on a tractor. Yet they hardly missed a day. BBC Brazil made a TV documentary featuring the shop, as the large population of Brazilians was badly hit in a flooded estate. They flocked to Mrs Quin's to buy what they could afford, while members of the public brought bedding and warm clothes to give away following an appeal.

Ennis and Ballinasloe were both badly flooded, but the

only other shop to close for more than a couple of hours was the one in Cork's North Main Street, which was inundated overnight, with a lot of stock being spoiled. Even so it was open the following afternoon, thanks to manager Angie and volunteers.

In the Midlands, Athy and Carlow got their share of rain when the River Barrow burst its banks; we were fortunate to be above the high tide mark in Clonmel.

We hope for better things in 2010, but as I write, we are starting on a third week of frost and snow. — **Marjorie Quarton.** ■



Mrs Quin's shop in North Main Street, Cork felt the pinch from flooding and a silent footfall.



The close of 2009 witnessed many scenes of devastation in a flooded countryside as this picture taken near Gort, Co. Galway shows.

It was much the same story in Gort's main street and in many other towns where normal business at Mrs Quin's shops was disrupted.

