



Listening to the children

**Testimonies from the world's blind and
partially sighted teenagers**

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and partially sighted teenagers



The views expressed in this publication are exclusively those of the individuals who hold and express them. The opinions are not binding upon, nor necessarily shared by, the organisations which have sponsored this publication.

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Foreword

In June 2008, the Spanish National Organisation of the Blind (ONCE), in co-operation with the Children's Committee of the World Blind Union (WBU) and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), hosted an international congress in one of its educational resource centres. The aim of the congress was to facilitate a gathering of blind and partially sighted teenagers from the different regions of the world and enable them to reflect on their lives and put forward their demands and needs.

As part of the selection process to take part in the congress, the teenagers were asked to present an essay on their lives as visually impaired teenagers, their experience in the field of children's rights in their communities, region and country, and on any of the subject areas addressed at the congress, such as the family, education and peer relationships.

Through the offices of the World Blind Union Secretariat, we were delighted to receive more than 100 pieces of work from countries as diverse as Namibia, Ghana, New Zealand and Russia —to name



but four. The essays are the direct source of inspiration for this book.

Thanks to this, we can now present a selection of the stories we received. We are sure the selected works will leave nobody feeling indifferent. The book relates the stories of happy children and sad children; communities willing to accept diversity and others that reject it; families devoted to caring for their children and meeting their needs, and also others that abandon their children because they are unable to face up to a responsibility they feel is overwhelming...whatever the story, here we have a compilation of different—and on many occasions even contrasting—testimonies from boys and girls.

For these children, this book will be a beacon of hope and just reward for a lifetime overcoming adversity. We dedicate the book to all of them, their families, schools and communities as a sign of our heartfelt recognition and gratitude for sharing their life experiences as young people with disabilities.

The book is timely, coming as it does at a crucial moment for us with the recent entry into force of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Article 7 of the Convention, addressing specifically boys and girls with disabilities, holds that:

3. States Parties shall ensure that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right.

Let us, therefore, listen to their message.

Among the general concerns expressed by the teenagers are discrimination, social exclusion, feeling different, a shortage of teachers, limited independence and the difficulty of accessing education.

Cosmas from Zimbabwe attends a special school where there are no adapted textbooks, so the only way he can access information is by using tape recorders that break down regularly. Raúl from Cuba studies at an arts school where there are no textbooks or maths books in braille. He faces the added problem that there are no adaptive technologies for the blind at his disposal. Stephanie from Cameroon tells us there are 75 students per class in her state school, so the teacher cannot meet her special needs as a visually impaired student.

In Europe, Elena from the Netherlands is the first ever visually impaired student at her mainstream school but, despite having

state-of-the-art adaptive devices for her specific needs, she still has to advocate for her rights regularly. Katie from Australia regrets not being able to learn to drive.

The concerns of the children from industrialised countries focus on social affairs: not wanting to feel or look different from their peers; accessing information on the blackboard; feeling happy with themselves as people with a visual impairment; and feeling integrated. On the other hand, the key issues for the teenagers from less wealthy countries are more closely related to fundamental rights held by all boys and girls: to live with their parents; not to be abandoned; the right to attend school, have books, learn braille and not be mistreated.

At the end of the book we felt it appropriate to include the DECLARATION which was adopted at the International Congress 'Listening to the Children' in Pontevedra, Spain, on behalf of all blind and partially sighted children in the world. The declaration is a key tool and reference point for those in charge of drawing up and implementing policies for the care and attention of these children.

In conclusion, we would like to acknowledge and thank everyone most sincerely for their invaluable contribution and solidarity with those who continue to be **INVISIBLE CHILDREN**.

Indian Ocean

Australia

Sydney

Canberra

Melbourne

Indian Ocean



Katie Butler

Age: 16

Every teenager can say, 'It is hard being a teenager.' It is a time of life when one starts making decisions. You have to choose and plan a career and take steps to ensure the best possible future.

It is a worrying time, you feel uncertain about exactly what you want to do with your life and you are scared, you question yourself; 'What if I don't make it...? What if I'm really bad at it? What if I never get a job?'

I'm a sixteen-year-old Australian girl, currently asking myself these questions and I'm also contemplating living my life with severe vision impairment.

Being vision impaired affects your life more than people realise. Vision impairment is often considered not a very serious disability or not very life-affecting at all. Well that is simply not true. I will never drive a car, motorbike, or airplane, this rules out a few career choices! My school mates are all currently learning to drive cars. It is ever so irritating when they go on and on about their latest ventures on the road, describing exactly how wonderful it feels to be a driver.

In my school classes I use special equipment to do my work. A CCTV, which is a large, stationary magnifier, also I use a laptop

computer to write with. As well as these large and attention attracting objects, I have either a vision support teacher helping me, or a teacher's aid, reading notes off the blackboard or writing notes for me.

It is very hard to have a friend sit next to me in classes, which is something most kids get to enjoy. What with vast amounts of equipment on one side of me and a helper on the other, there simply is no room for a friend to sit near.

Having a helper in the classroom is a source of jealousy amongst my friends. They seem to think the helper actually does my work for me, but this is not the case. I probably have to do *more* work than the others because no one else has someone next to them forcing them to do the work and expecting me to finish everything. I can't be a typical teenager and slack off or take it easy when I am just not in the mood to do work. My sighted friends don't appreciate how lucky they are. They have the freedom to sit wherever they want and sit next to whoever they want in the classroom, but I have to sit in the same seat every lesson.

Keeping the relationship between friends is made very difficult because of the large amount of time I spend away from school having eye surgery and recovering from it. I often lose contact with my friends during these times and when I come back to school after a few months I find so much has happened. Things have changed without me knowing about it. I find I've been replaced in school projects or not invited to a party, for example. I end up feeling forgotten and shunned.

Out of school I use a mobility cane. This lessens the chance of me tripping over obstacles. However, it does not totally eliminate the risk! I get so many weird and wonderful reactions when using the cane. For example, in the shopping centre people stare and stare at me, like I'm some endangered animal at the zoo that they will only ever get to see once. Sometimes people stare so hard, with so much concentration they walk right into me, which is the last thing they should've done because they'll often get a whack from the cane on their ankles! Accidentally of course!

Alternatively, it is quite funny when some people are so determined to get *out* of my way they go to any lengths to do so. Mothers will grab their children out of my path and tell them off for daring to walk in my way. People with trolleys will make wild, deadly moves not considering that by getting out of my way they threaten the lives of five others. Some people will make huge, kangaroo-like leaps to get out of the way, causing great embarrassment on their behalf because it is very hard to resist giggling. However, there are those stubborn, annoying shoppers who refuse to move and stand deliberately in front of me, eventually I will have to negotiate a new path to get around them, which is difficult and something I shouldn't have to do.

Sometimes people say really weird things as well. When I go out with my friend who has a guide dog, parents will stop their children to explain loudly, 'That's a blind girl and that's her blind dog.' I should hope the guide dog isn't blind, because we would be in trouble then! The people who say things also seem to be a little confused. We are vision impaired, not deaf. Other things people

say are, 'Get out of the way of the blind girl' or 'Move, she can't see you' or when they walk into me, 'Oh I'm so sorry, I didn't see you!'. Like, 'Hello, I'm the one with low vision!'

There doesn't seem to be enough awareness about guide dogs because people rarely call them guide dogs. Most don't seem to know you aren't allowed to pat them when they are working either. After my friend explains that 'No, you can't pat the dog', they often say, 'Oh sorry, I couldn't resist!' This annoys my friend and me greatly because people should exercise some self-restraint.

I rarely talk back to those who say silly things, but occasionally when I've had enough I'll say, 'You don't have to stare,' or something similar when people are being very rude.

Despite the responses you get if you have a guide dog, I hope to get one when I leave school. It would make being vision impaired almost worthwhile. A guide dog hopefully has more personality than a cane. Luckily people don't ask to pat my cane, however sometimes complete strangers ask if they can have a go with it. Of course I refuse them. I can't see the attraction myself.

I am sure people with other disabilities get more support than the vision impaired, which is quite unfair. I went into a chemist once and saw in their special needs section, wheel chairs, walking frames and crutches. This annoyed me because there were no magnifiers, specialist software for a computer or mobility canes there. I can get my free cane and mobility lessons from the Guide Dogs Association and some assistance from Vision Australia, but it still takes a lot of effort and struggle to get the additional things

you need if you're vision impaired. There is only one place where I can get the type of magnifier I need and it is not cheap. The special equipment I need is also expensive and it is hard to find anyone willing to help with the expenses. Recently my mother and I have been researching ways to get very necessary magnifying software for my computer. My mother has rung all sorts of organisations and none of them are willing to help. I am often told if you had a learning disability as well you would be eligible. So, basically, if you're vision impaired you have to be rich as well!

I hope after you've read my article you will understand a little bit about life as a vision impaired teenager and that it makes you appreciate how lucky you are to have sight. I wish to educate and raise awareness about how someone with vision impairment prefers to be treated, because I know my life would be a little easier if there was more awareness, understanding and support.

Kelsey Allen

Age: 16

I begin by being born. I was born two months premature. Problems occurred in my birth and, as a result, I am vision impaired. On the surface, the only way people know that I have a vision impairment is if the muscles around my right eye decide to go on their lunch break; they slack off, and my eye wanders toward the right. Once the muscles start to get back to work, my eye moves back to normal for a while. The movements are a lot more frequent if I am tired, and are never under my conscious control, much to the amusement of some of my friends, especially if my eye moves fast. At school, someone might sometimes follow my eye and ask, "Are you looking at me?" or, "What are you looking at?". I pause in conversation, replying, "Yes, I have a lazy eye".

My left eye compensates for the disability of the right, it is the dominant eye, unless I close it, then my right eye has to work. All of my reading happens through my left eye and my glasses have only one prescription lens, the left.

I also have trouble with depth perception, again, especially if I am tired. This has caused many near misses and some collisions with stationary and rather hard objects. My severely limited peripheral vision also causes problems. Because of this, I will not be obtaining a driver's licence. However, this will be safer for everyone else on

the road, hopefully not because of my bad driving skills. When the people in my class at school tell me of their weekend driving lessons, or the car that they want to buy, I always stop and think that I won't be having them and that there is no point in my buying a car. However, on the scale of vision impaired teenagers, I am one of the more fortunate ones, and there are many other people who do not drive a car.

I believe that I have been blessed with two of the most fantastic parents. My mum and dad have supported me in everything that I have decided to do in my sixteen years of life. They have encouraged me to become independent and to not hide behind my disability. I believe that no young person should, regardless of their disability, a value that I wish to communicate to every teenager. I firmly believe that disability does not dictate what we are able to achieve in our lifetime, and I hope to be an example of that.

As a teenager most of my time is spent at school. I thoroughly enjoy human biology, chemistry and literature, my favourite subjects at high school. I will graduate from high school in 2008 and will sit my final exams for university entry later that year.

School for me is no more difficult than it is for my friends with better eyesight than me. I am able to achieve the grades that I want and am the top student in some of my classes. I also have very supportive friends at school. Sometimes I can't read what is on the board but my glasses usually fix that problem. If not, I will ask whoever is sitting next to me what is there and they will tell me. I have a passion for learning and I do not allow my vision

impairment to prevent me from enjoying school or learning new things.

I have discovered an aptitude for music, regardless of my vision impairment. In a way, that is a bonus, as music requires little observance with your eyes and more with your ears. If only I had 20/20 hearing! Being a teenager, I have dreams of the future, of hopefully going to university to study music and becoming a music teacher. After the school day, I am almost always playing my flute, either as a soloist or in an ensemble, and love to learn about anything to do with music. I enter flute competitions and practical exams and love to go to musical recitals or see the West Australian Symphony, which I hope to one day be able to join as a flautist.

Having my vision impairment and meeting others with disabilities, I have wanted to further my musical studies into music therapy. I want to become a teacher of braille music to be able to teach music to vision impaired children to share my passion and knowledge with as many people as possible.

When the weekend comes around, I go to work. I currently work part-time at a local coffee shop as a barista, which has given me both independence and many friendships. After telling my boss that I was vision impaired and that I did not see it to become a problem while working there, I was given a chance and have been there for over a year. Regardless of my degree of impairment, I decided that I wanted a job because I did not want to rely on my parents for money and wanted to gain a sense of personal

responsibility. I love working where I am and the people I work with have made the experience of working part-time all the more worthwhile.

I might also catch up with my friends at the movies. I have told each of my friends of my vision impairment, usually because they have noticed the movements of my eye. One of my friends sometimes laughs if my eye is really noticeable, but I laugh with him and am not offended. Others might stop and say, "Your eye just moved weirdly!". I always smile because my eye is uniquely me and I would not change it for the world.

One place that my vision impairment is not unusual is the Association for the Blind in Perth, Western Australia. I have been a member all my life and am now a volunteer with the children's holiday programme. Most of my school holidays are spent there working with children of all ages, and I have also made some fantastic friends with vision impairments like me.

Having my own vision impairment has enabled me to understand, mentor and encourage some of the younger children that I have met to participate in activities from which they would have otherwise been excluded. The children that I have met through the Association for the Blind have also taught me how to safely do sighted guiding and see the world through another perspective.

I see myself as somewhat of an ambassador of the Association. I have introduced a number of my friends to the volunteering I do during the holidays and have been a musician at functions in the main offices in Perth. I guess being vision impaired has given me

the drive to further excel in anything that I want to do, whether it be academically or musically, as I want to show people that there are no boundaries set by disabilities.

Through the Association for the Blind I have also had such opportunities to further my musical studies through scholarships and awards and, in particular, meet other teenagers like me on local and international levels by entering this essay competition. Like other teenagers, I love to socialise and meet new people and take any opportunity to further myself in any way possible.

I am still able to live a normal life with my vision impairment and still achieve my goals if I set my mind to them. I was a finalist in the West Australian Youth Awards in 2005 for being an inspiration to others my age and hope to continue to inspire any other people I may meet.

Steph Vienna

Age: 16

A NEW DAY

Jumping into bed Chris snuggles into the bed covers, with his parents tucking him in tight. Kissing his glowing cheeks, they reluctantly leave his room, having stayed longer than they usually would. Chris's mum Kerri slumps down on the couch and lets out a sigh. Her husband Russell places his arm around her, and without words they can sense each other's unease at the thought of the big day tomorrow.

The next morning starts early for what all hope will be the happiest day. Chris can hardly contain his grin as he quickly eats his cereal. After so many days of talking about it, he cannot believe he is finally starting school today.

"Come on, hurry" Chris yells, racing ahead. His parents catch up to hold his hands. Whilst Chris talks excitedly throughout their walk, both parents are lost in thoughts of their beautiful boy. They are so proud of him. This is a huge step in Chris's life. Over the past few days Chris had confided that people's behaviour seemed to change towards him once they knew about his visual impairment. He had asked therefore that his parents delay speaking to his new classmates about his limited vision. Having faced many challenges

so far, the granting of this wish seemed right, even if it was only for a day or two, however now they were not so sure.

In a home streets away another family is also getting ready for their first day. Michael looks so cute in his new uniform and Ashley, his mother, happily takes some memorable photos. Looking like a turtle with his huge backpack on, Michael struggles his way to the car. Ashley puts on a brave face, ignoring the squirmy feeling in her stomach as she smiles, tightening his seat belt. This is a big day for her too.

Both families arrive at the school gate and head for the classroom in a group. Within minutes both boys are giggling, and are soon chattering away about their favourite things.

They all walk into the classroom together and it seems no time at all has passed before there are rushed cuddles and tentative waves of goodbye. Having all taken the day off work and still too anxious to move far from the school, Kerri, Russell and Ashley decide to have a coffee at the local café, where they share stories about their sons.

Meanwhile in the classroom Chris and Michael are sitting in a corner excitedly talking about which football team is better than the other, discovering they both barrack for the same team. Quickly the subject changes to popular super heroes and to which one is more powerful. "I like the one that flies" said Michael. "Nah, x-ray vision is better" says Chris, "I wish I could be a super hero".

At the front of the class the teacher cheerfully announces "Ok children, go find a seat that you would like". Chris moves slowly

to his feet. Michael and some of the other children race quickly to the back of the classroom. "My brother said that is the coolest place to sit". "That makes us cool" said another. Whilst Michael scrambles to hold onto two seats, Chris, following his mum's early directions, finds a well lit place to sit up the front. "Chris, come on, I have saved you a seat, quick before someone else takes it" Michael shouts. Through the noise of the class and a sea of blurred faces Chris cannot work out clearly where the voice of his new friend is coming from. "Quickly" calls the teacher and Michael sits down in a huff. He is confused and annoyed that Chris didn't come to sit next to him. He had wanted to talk more about footy and other stuff.

Up the front, Chris struggles to get the right books. Suddenly he feels a tap on his shoulder and turns to see the friendly face of his teacher's aide, Prue, who he had met last week. He quickly calms down. Prue helps him to get started, reading to Chris what the teacher has written on the board. It seems like only minutes later and the bell rings for morning break. Chris turns to Prue with an anxious face as a bunch of jostling children rush past to get outside to play, "Can you come outside with me?" "Yes, of course I will", Prue said, "it would be my pleasure".

At the playground Michael yells out to Chris "Let's play". Chris looks out into the unfamiliar surrounds and responds hesitantly "It's ok, I have Prue to hang around with". Michael crosses his arms and stomps off to find some other friends. "What's with him?", Michael mumbles to himself, disappointed as he had liked talking to Chris before class.

Chris's stomach tightens and so does his grip on Prue's hand every time the tone of the playground rises with the shouts of the children. Sensing Chris's discomfort, she leads him to a quieter part of the playground, where they sit down. Relaxed, it seems like seconds until the bell is calling the children back to class.

The teacher announces that it is now time to get a book from the shelf. Chris remains seated, while Prue goes up to select one for him. "I found a book for you, I think you'll love it" says Prue. Chris sits quietly whilst Prue reads to him.

Before too long it's lunch time and Prue helps Chris get his lunch out from his backpack, leading him to the bench which looks out onto the playground. "Where is your lunch? Are you going to stay with me?" Chris asks anxiously. "No Chris, I am going to have lunch with the other teachers. But don't worry. I will be back before this afternoon's class". Disappointed, Chris looks at the clear glossy wrapping encasing his sandwich, trying to find the opening. A little annoyed that he could not have his sandwich on a plate like he usually does, he tugs and tears until the bread springs from its cover.

Sitting quietly, Chris is overjoyed when Michael dashes past him yelling "Some kids are playing with a ball, come on, it's fun." Wishing very much to join in, he follows as Michael races ahead.

"Over here", "Me! Me! Throw it to me!" It is chaos with everyone wanting to shoot the ball into the hoop. With a deep breath Chris steps tentatively onto the court into the group of bodies. Only minutes pass before Chris cops a painful blow to the side of

the face with a basketball. He whimpers whilst the others crowd around him. "That was an easy pass, why didn't you catch it?" "Maybe you need glasses!" Laughing, the boys quickly resume their game. Chris, injured by the comments, walks away as quickly as he can. He tearfully thinks of home.

After lunch it seems like hours for Chris until it is finally time to leave. At the sound of the final bell both boys meet their Mums at the gate, dragging their families off in separate directions. It seems that for Chris this is the first day of many difficult days to come.

Author's note:

What happens next could well affect these families for the rest of their lives. Things cannot be left as they are.

As someone who is now a teenager, having experienced similar situations I would tell Chris that I understand how difficult it is. Learning to trust and to be accepted in a world where the majority has a limited understanding of what it is like to live with a disability is a constant challenge.

There is no avoiding it, he will need to go to school tomorrow and it is not going to be easy. Starting anything new may bring with it some challenges, and one of the hardest things to do is to accept who you are whilst also trying to gain the acceptance of others.

I would explain to Michael that I understand his confusion at Chris's behaviour. All is not as it seems and just like him, Chris

is finding his way. I would say that whilst there are things that Chris may find difficult, there are also many things that he can do. He is still the same person that Michael liked when they first met. Having a disability can be very isolating and I would ask him to give Chris some more time.

To Chris's parents I would say, there are times when you will not know what to do, there are no rule books. You can only do what you think is best at the time, sometimes it will work out, others not. One of the most important things is to provide a loving and protective place for Chris to grow; the rest will hopefully come in time.



Nigeria

Central
African
Republic

Cameroon
Yaounde

Equatorial
Guinea

Congo

Gabon

Zaire

Angola

South
Atlantic
Ocean



Stephanie Noubissie

Age: 14

Many youth nowadays face the same problem as I do. I will first of all narrate to you a story which I once heard about one of a fellow friends who faced the same problem. And the story goes thus:

She was named Anne and she lived with one of her uncles because her father never had enough finance to send her to school. Her parents, both mother and father, did not notice that she was partially sighted. While a child, she grew up and reached an age of going to school. In school, her teacher discovered that she was making so many mistakes and classified her as a stupid child. This was a strange thing to her teacher and she never considered her as a good child.

One day, while in school, her teacher wrote questions on the board for them to fill the blank spaces. Anne never wrote anything, and when her teacher came closer to make her book, nothing was written. Anne's teacher was very angry and decided to call on her parents (guardians). When they arrived, everything was explained and her teacher suddenly learnt that she was a patient. This is terrible, she replied; something must be done. Because Anne's parents did not have money, her teacher decided to take care of her. She brought her to the hospital where a special doctor

took care of her. They prescribed her eye glasses which helped her to be able to regain her sight.

This is the same problem we face. This problem makes us not work at home or study. It keeps us from doing some activities successfully. All these problems need a solution.



Arctic
Ocean



North
Pacific
Ocean

Canada

Hudson
Bay

Montreal
Ottawa

U.S.A

mexico



Dayna Schnell

Age: 14

When the visually impaired lead people to the well, it takes great courage and energy.

This year the Peer Support Group at Nickle Junior High in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, is working to raise \$750 to build a community well for a village that currently has no decent water source for miles, far away in Africa. Peer Support is a group of students and teachers that meet once a week to plan and host charity events.

As the most experienced member of the Peer Support Team at the school, Dayna is helping to promote the actions of students to raise funds for this project. She was born in April 1993 with achromatopsia, a visual impairment.

Last year the Peer Support team at Nickle raised \$1600 to get good food for a school for single mothers and their children in a developing country. For someone who has difficulty seeing, she has already seen a lot.

When Dayna was eight, her mother accepted a job in The Netherlands working for Royal Dutch Shell. At the age of ten Dayna could communicate well in her second language, Dutch. By the age of twelve, Dayna and her little sister had visited around 26 different countries. While in The Netherlands, Dayna placed

wreaths on the Canadian war memorials for the Canadian Embassy ceremonies. The family moved back to Canada in 2005 and are now very comfortably settled into their new lives.

Dayna volunteers constantly at her school. She helped once again with her Remembrance Day celebrations and she's on the Yearbook committee. Each of these activities is very important to her, but the group that she is most devoted to is Peer Support.

Dayna helps out outside of school as well. The CNIB (Canadian National Institute for the Blind) has a group called the Ambassadors Club. It is a group that gets blind and visually impaired teenagers together once a month to work on their public speaking skills and help the CNIB with public awareness. As an example, in December 2007 she went to help at a christmas party for young blind and visually impaired children.

While Dayna was in Grade 8, she was awarded the top citizenship award in 2007, and she has already received an interim award in the first term of Grade 9. With all of this going on, Dayna still produces above average marks and loves to read, write poetry and draw.

For sports, Dayna invests time in dance and synchronized swimming which runs multiple days per week. Winter activities include cross-country skiing and snowboarding.

When you meet Dayna, what quickly comes across is her remarkable personality that oozes fun-loving, demonstrates hard work, and her super-size smile. Having learned an additional language, she was

assisted by two different blind communities in The Netherlands and Canada.

With her love for foreign cultures and countries, the world is in great hands when this partially sighted teenager leads the way.

Tanya Peterson

Age: 13

The life of a visually impaired teen starts out small. This all started in 1994 with a baby whose name is Tanya Peterson.

She was born blind, her retinas weren't growing, but she was able to get some kind of laser operation on her eyes. It worked on the right eye but not the left.

As she grew up it was difficult for her because from grade 1 to half of grade 6 she got behind in her work because they could not really help her, she did not even know what a cane was or braille, she never read a whole book by herself.

Then one day they moved to the city of Calgary. When she got there she was scared thinking how she would get by. Then she met a teacher who could teach her how to use a cane, a teacher who can teach her to use braille and read it, and a teacher who can teach her subjects to get by with work.

Now she is in junior high and learning lots. She has caught up with all her subjects except one.

And with her social life she is doing good, lots of friends. She does orientation and mobility. A funny story is that one time when she was walking to take the train, at the first station there was

a lady who passed out and then at the last station, which is the fifth station, there was a homeless man lying in front of the door. She was scared but still made it through.

What she did one day, she went to the mall with her two blind/visually impaired friends and they went to buy lunch. At the lunch counter the lady just asked what the three girls wanted, not what they wanted on it, so all they got was bread.

They went to the mall themselves because Tanya's mom is so supportive and lets her explore new things and new feelings of life.

Now she started telling me about this week called white cane week. Apparently during that week she was told to write up 10 stupid questions, and it was really funny for her because she had fun with it because she's been asked so much, such as how do you walk or how do you face the person if you can't see them, but some of them were good ones to be asked because people who have never been around her did not know anything about being blind/visually impaired.

White cane week has helped her at school in the way that they don't push or shove her, they are aware of the cane and if she looks lost they will ask her if she needs help.

South
Pacific
Ocean



Chile

Santiago de Chile



Peru

Brazil

Bolivia

Paraguay

Uruguay

Argentina



Christopher Martínez Lagos

Age: 15

It's four o'clock in the afternoon, and here I am recalling what I have experienced, wondering how to put on paper what it means to be alive nowadays and what beginning adolescence means for me.

It's difficult to pinpoint the change, the exact moment that says from now on I will begin to grow, my behaviour will change, my body will change, my interests will change and it will be more and more difficult to understand the change in environment. Despite all this, I can certainly go on without having any problems.

Right now I am enrolled in School 7 José Toribio Medina. I'll start my intermediate grades there and my whole world will change again. It's a mixed school with places for students with disabilities, so I won't be surrounded by people like me; there I'll be different and there'll be new things that are going to be tough for me, apart from the new subjects and material to learn. Above all, though, relating with my peers will be the toughest thing. It'll be the first time for me in a school with so many people, and I don't know how I'll cope. I just hope they take me for what I am and give me the chance to tell them I'm just like them. If I get the chance to meet my friends at school things will be easier, because I'll have backing from people who can support me if I need it.

Just like other young people my age, I've started to become interested in playing musical instruments like the piano and the accordion (although not many of us take up that instrument!).

I've always liked music; I enjoy singing too and have learnt the notes using my hearing. One of my dreams is to be able to attend a conservatory of music and then study everything related to music.

I haven't been able to live without new technologies and computing. Right now Messenger has turned into a bit of an obsession for me, and I can be in touch with all my friends and family. I've got a computer programme that helps me to use it by myself. It's called Jaws and I think it's going to be an absolute necessity for me in my life if I want to retain the independence I began to carve out for myself a year ago. I can travel on the underground without any difficulties, although I do have a few funny stories, like when I got lost on my way to the library for the blind. When it comes to getting around I'm pretty confident, but at night and in places I don't know I feel unsafe.

Society and I don't get on that well, because there are people who just don't understand me, who challenge me and show me disrespect. Having said that, in general terms my experience has shown me people aren't bad and I've had the chance to meet good people. However, I would like folk to feel more empathy —maybe that's what's missing from this world, humanism. We're all human beings, and a physical difference doesn't mean a world of difference, nor does it turn me into an extra-terrestrial.

Just like any other social being, I have my family, made up of my three brothers, my mum and her husband. The family is supposed

to be the most important thing for a person, and for me it's always been true. The days I spend at home are not the best ones — I miss my friends and regret the cards life has dealt me, and I don't think I need the vital bond between children and the rest of the family that some say should exist.

Some day I want to have my own family, and in that case I would like to build up a closer relationship, not like the ones I have had. I hope to look back one day and be able to say I have achieved the goals I set myself when I was just a teenager, when I could only dream, when songs took me to realities that only existed in my mind, in my ideals and the feelings I was learning to experience, in what life was, going out, parties, laughing and also sadness, some of it deep in my heart.

Most of these things have never passed my lips in the shape of expressions called words, which are as light as the wind and mean everything to me. These are the tools I can use to perceive what's going on and try to build up an idea or image within myself. The power of language is greater than any other thing. I express myself, communicate, believe, dream, imagine and live through words mixed with melodies.

And now she has entered my world. She appeared suddenly, like when the sun comes out, like when I feel the wind on my face, just like any other day. On a normal day my girlfriend, who means confidence and support in my life, appeared. These are feelings I wasn't sure about before. I feel especially close to her, something that is good for me. We support each other and I am happy life

has given me the chance to meet her and, above all, be with her. Times will change, as will our intentions. Nobody knows if she is the love of my life, or if life will see to it that I meet the person who has everything to make me feel complete as a man, the man I am becoming. Every day I change, and this makes me think things aren't that simple any more. They never were in fact, but I am now capable of looking after myself.

I'm starting another period in my life; yet another one. They say this is the nicest and I'll never forget it because I am in a state of metamorphosis. I am in my cocoon and I hope to become a butterfly that flies high and goes wherever it wants, knowing my own life and playing a starring role as the main character in it.

Erich Oppliger Rodríguez

Age: 15

This is the stage of my life where I realise I'm not like other teenagers; I have a disability that means I need some adaptations in different parts of my life. For example I need my school material in large print, while in everyday life I need a white cane when I go out because it helps me overcome the problems I have due to my limited visual field and enables me to move and walk around without being scared something is going to happen to me on the way. That way I can be more independent.

This is maybe what sets me apart most from other young people, because when we are children we all depend on others, but as we grow up we tend to distance ourselves from those who protect us. We become more independent and experience things that our parents don't. This has not been the case with me, however, because my parents keep protecting me as if I were a child because of my disability, and although it's difficult for them to take, I am growing up and going through psychological and physical changes. These changes will make me more and more mature, enable me to see life from different viewpoints and come to terms with myself as a disabled teenager; it doesn't mean I won't be able to develop just like others, but it will be a little more difficult for me and I will need to find other ways to achieve my goals.

My parents' overprotection has become a hindrance for me in this period of life we call adolescence because, perhaps without meaning to, they don't let me do typical teenager things like go to parties with my friends or even just go out to have a good time. I can understand their apprehension, but it's also important for me to experience this kind of things because they'll help me to get to know my peers.

The experiences I have had up to now, including my disability, mean the way I think is not the same as other 15-year-old young men, but like a more mature person. My thoughts and way of looking at life are not typical of a modern-day young person. Maybe this is the main reason I don't have a lot of friends and I place too much weight on the friendships I do have. Added to this, the problems I have with my studies due to my disability mean I have to spend much more time studying than the average student, and I don't have spare time for hobbies and free-time activities. This cuts me off from my peers —when they are making plans for after class, I have to think about studying.

Social aspects play an important role in human beings' development, and it is precisely here where I still need to learn. This is not connected with my disability so much, but because I am a little shy and the fact that my parents overprotect me means I am less sure of myself when I face the world. It is difficult to mix with others and share experiences that could help me to open up and become more independent.

The major difficulty I am experiencing at this stage in my life is the lack of independence I have for recreational activities, sports and

other things people of my age do. This is basically down to the fact that I don't have the guts to do things because I lack confidence.

The problems I am having at this stage are not so much because of my visual impairment, although this has contributed in some way, but because my parents have worried about me too much and taken too much care of me. As a result I am shy and this is shown in the problems I have dealing with people and expressing my feelings.

On the other hand, my parents have strengthened my skills and helped me to accept my limitations, and this makes me more sure of myself as I face up to the adversities I have to address at this stage in my life.

My life has become a little monotonous right now, and I can't see beyond being with my family. This is not a bad thing, but obviously it has made me gradually more isolated and means I am missing out on enriching experiences that are typical in this phase and are, without a doubt, important in life.

Despite how complex this part of my life is, there are also some positive things I need to highlight, such as for instance how close my family is and how much support they provide when I go through any kind of change. In addition, I have my relationship with my best friends. All this has strengthened my self-confidence, made me more optimistic, encouraged my spirit to succeed and made me less liable to get frustrated, among other positive qualities.

I still have some of my adolescence to experience, and I am looking forward to surprising myself even more with a wide range of

feelings, emotions and changes that I will no doubt go through. The best thing would be to find a balance between the protection and security my family provides and the chance to learn and grow at the same time as my peers. We are all going through the same process of adolescence and searching for our identities.

Disability is not a great problem in my life, but I do recognise I am still lacking some tools to develop in this pathway. However, the most important part of the process is not to allow myself to be beaten by disability, because although it's true I need a little help, as I said at the beginning, I am capable of reaching a situation where I can look after myself, and with this in mind I face up to life and go on living it very enthusiastically.



Florida
USA

Havana

CUBA

Caribbean Sea



Dailín Santa Cruz

Age: 16

I am very proud of who I am, of my family and of my country, which is not just interested in guaranteeing the rights of girls and boys, but respects and defends them.

I have lived my entire life with sight problems (low vision) as I was born with a congenital condition known as Stargardt's disease. It was an ophthalmologist who diagnosed the condition. I have a visual acuity of 0.1 in both eyes and loss of central vision, so my peripheral sight is stronger.

I live in the countryside with my parents, who love me just as I adore them. We are a simple and humble family.

I studied primary education in a normal classroom in a mainstream school. I didn't go to a special school because it's quite far away from my home and I would have needed a scholarship. My mother didn't want me to leave, so she decided I would go to the school where she is a teacher.

Although she never taught me at school, she was my teacher at home. She always supported me in everything I needed, so I graduated from primary school with good marks.

I moved on to a secondary school in the country, called ESBEC, where I began my junior high studies. The curriculum for this level

of education changed and video-based classes were introduced, so I began to receive regular support from the instructors at the Special School for the Visually Impaired. They instructed and trained the teachers and heads at the school on how to teach me in class and during other activities.

Jaws was installed to enable me to use the computer, and since then I have found it easy to handle. As for career advice, my mother was my inspiration —since she is a teacher, she has instilled in me a love of teaching since I was little. I was also very interested in arts, and above all dance as I love dancing (especially to Cuban music).

So, when I started year nine I decided to study to be an art instructor. That way I could enjoy the two things I love in life: dancing and teaching those who want to dance, including people who, like me, have a disability.

When I found out the attitude testing to enter the school was about to be held I was a little worried and thought I wouldn't be offered a place —first of all because I wasn't trained in dancing techniques and secondly due to my disability, because one of the consequences of my vision loss is that I have some features others don't have.

So I started to get ready for the tests with support from a teacher who offered to help me. I also had support and encouragement from my parents and the teachers at the Special School. I worked hard and showed a lot of interest, love and perseverance.

And then, finally, the big day arrived when I would take the tests to enable me to make my dream come true. I still thought I wasn't

going to pass, but I was wrong because I was accepted with open arms. I was really delighted because they had recognised my skills and respected my rights as a person with disabilities.

Right now I am in second year at the school. Everyone —students and teachers— helps me and loves me. I never feel left out —on the contrary, everyone tries to make me feel equal to everyone else. I am involved in all the centre's activities, and I've taken part in a few competitions where I've won prizes for poems I wrote on various subjects.

Since I was young I have been a member of the Cuban Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted (ANCI). I've taken part in a lot of the activities they organise, such as athletics competitions, and I've won or come second.

For all of this I have to thank my revolution, because if I hadn't been born and brought up in beautiful, independent Cuba, I would not have enjoyed so many opportunities. As a mixed-race person with a disability from a humble background, I have the same rights as anyone else to free education and health care, to enjoy everything we have here and to be integrated in the labour market in society.

Dioelvis Lores Árias

Age: 14

I am going to tell you about my experience as a visually impaired teenager in a special country: Cuba.

We all know that with adolescence come major biological, psychological and social changes in human beings. As a person with disabilities the shift was even more pronounced because I had gone to a special school, called 14th June, for my primary education.

We received specialised and specific attention there. I started going there when I was very young and continued until 6th grade. My teachers were great —they taught me the letters of the alphabet and I will never forget that as I found them difficult because of my disability. I learnt daily living skills, how to read, do maths calculations, handicrafts like model-making, drawing and painting, among other things.

I entered several competitions like 'Reading Martí', who is our national hero, 'Camilo and Che Ideology Day', based on two of the greatest heroes in our history, Antonio Maceo Grajales and Ernesto Guevara de la Serna.

During my rehabilitation process I always had support from the visually impaired team at school. They helped me to do close-up

eye exercises like outlining, jigsaw puzzles, threading a needle, drawing, reading, writing, joining the dots, mazes and so on to make up for my impairment. All the students at the school had some kind of disability, so we felt very much like a family and we were treated that way.

When I finished primary school, I went on to continue my studies at the Sergio Eloy Correa Cosme Basic Secondary School. A new challenge in my life. I sit in the front row, I need to put the textbooks close to my face to be able to see them properly, and I need help from my classmates to copy down everything from the blackboard and not get left behind.

It's a group of 28 students who all help me to face up to life with my disability. The general teachers work as hard as they can with me to shape me as a future worker, instilling positive qualities and attitudes that help me get an all-round and general education.

I'm happy to have specialised teachers in computing. They show me a whole new and unknown world, a world that gives me scientific knowledge and helps me to view my life as a teenager from closer range. During breaks I join my teenage peers and we argue about things I find interesting like sexuality, the challenges people our age face —since there are more and more teenagers with HIV in the world because of one-off and unprotected sexual relations—, sport —I like chess because it helps me to develop intellectually—, and when we talk about culture this is my true vocation, because my greatest wish is to become a renowned sculptor.

Friends, please don't think everything has been tough. It was difficult at first, but as time went by I got more and more used to the new environment, my new classmates and their families, the teachers and the new conditions I had to study. Shyness was almost my undoing, but the best medicine to help me adapt was the support I was given by everyone around me.

I feel proud of everyone who supported me and helped me to move forward, and I am grateful to them. I would like you to know that although I have a condition I inherited from my dear mother, this hasn't stopped me from having a normal intellectual, psychological and social development. Quite the contrary; it has enabled me to develop just like other children my age, and I've also developed other skills at the same age. For example in plastic arts I was able to excel in painting, and I have won some regional awards and prizes in competitions organised by the pioneer movement like 'Where does the palm tree grow from?', 'I know my organisation' and 'Martí Youth Seminar'.

Lázaro Óscar Tío Saurit

Age: 17

I have the chance to explain a lot of feelings I have inside me that I want to express outside my circle of family and friends. I think a lot of my feelings could be used as experiences for children in other parts of the world who have the same disability as me.

I get on well with my family, friends and neighbours. My family does everything it can to make my life useful and help me grow. They help me in my studies so that I can have a bright and secure future, and they help me integrate in society. They give me chores to do at home so that I can be independent in the future, just like any person with no disability.

For example, I go to buy drinks and bread, I take the rubbish out, I get dressed by myself and bathe myself and I go out for walks with my cane in public places. I also play dominoes, shoot hoops and play hide and seek.

As for my friends, I can tell you they give me as much support as they can whenever I need it, for instance they help me to cross the road and they escort me if we are going to a party. They take care of me as much as they look after themselves.

When it comes close to exam time, they dictate revision notes to help me get good marks.

My neighbours!!! I could tell you so many things about them. My life is so happy with them. Every time I leave the house I can hear shouts of 'Óscar'. They call me to say hello, joke with me and look after my every step. If I go the wrong way they call me to let me know. They really do look out for me, and in this sense they have never let me down.

In the afternoon I sit down on the pavement and talk about lots of different things with them —pelota, football, what they have been up to, whether it's to do with politics, culture or their studies. When I have needed help with practical homework exercises they've contributed and helped me to do the homework properly.

Along with my neighbours, I have taken part in activities for the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, decorating the streets, getting food for the stews we make and taking part in public events. By the way, I have to say I'm a bit of a public speaker.

When I was at primary school and thanks to support from some good teachers, I was taught some skills that have helped to make my studies now more rewarding. I was taught braille, which helps me learn new things without feeling any obstacle as a blind person.

I think it's important to underline the support I've been given by the Ministry of Education in all the schools I've attended. Thanks to this I've been able to learn better.

The Cuban Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted has also contributed to my socialisation as a human being. Thanks to the association I can walk without assistance with my cane, I

have spatial awareness, I know how to cope and do activities, for example play dominoes, take part in sports events like athletics and participate in other recreational activities.

My daily life is quite busy and my family plays an important role in this. I have younger brothers and sisters and we learn something new every day, for example I know how to make a phone call and I listen to the news on TV and the radio, so I know what's happening in Cuba and internationally.

I talk a lot about history, and I was also given a typewriter to write in braille, so I can let my imagination run loose. I mustn't forget that I also have a radio and cassette player that was bought for me, so I can enjoy myself listening to music, sport and all the news on the radio.

One of my favourite hobbies is singing, and thanks to the Cuban Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted, a prestigious and humanitarian organisation, I have had the opportunity to sing in competitions. I've always had support from my peers in this, and it wouldn't be possible without their help.

I will always be grateful to the people who live in my home city for all the help I get every day, but I think there should be more awareness of disability issues through campaigns in the media, and especially in blindness. Not everyone in the street feels the same sensitivity in terms of helping us, so I recommend more education in this field.

I know I am capable of achieving whatever I want in my life thanks to my determination, dedication and studies and, above

all, because I know I can count on support from the government, my teachers, my friends and my family.

I am very respectful of my classmates and neighbours. I am very happy to be alive, and that is the feeling I give everyone: love, kindness and respect, just the same as I get from them.

My greatest hope is to become an outstanding lawyer who metes out justice and responds honourably. In some way I want to give back to a society that has done so many good things for me.

Lennier López

Age: 16

Dear former teachers,

As I sit down to write this letter I can remember all of you with your slim figures, standing at the front of the class and talking with such authority, educating me. How enriching that time was —those were glory years I hold nostalgically in my soul.

Nowadays I've got very different friends from the ones I had at the special school. I learnt there that obstacles don't matter; what matters is people's ability to overcome them. My classmates now are people who don't have a visual impairment like me, but I am sure they have other deficiencies: some are shy, some just make fun of everyone and others have loads of complexes. I don't know —nobody's perfect, and I think everyone is equal.

I've got classmates from lots of different places. Some of them look down on me or just treat me indifferently, but to tell the truth I don't care. Their spirits are sick and I forgive them - they don't know how unfortunate they are because they cannot see beyond a person's physical appearance.

I can tell you that when I finished primary school, where you were my guides, I went to the EIDE school as a chess player. I met a lot of new people with whom I shared three years. After finishing

ninth grade I went on to ESPS, where new minds became part of my life —some to understand me, some to help me and others to ignore me. There are all kinds of people under the sun, good folk and bad folk, people who come together and create a bitter but comforting drink called life.

I can tell you I feel comfortable socially, and proud of myself for being able to take advantage of the opportunities life has given me alongside people who have helped me to grow.

I'll say goodbye now, but before I do I would like to thank you for everything you did for me, for being with me and explaining everything to me.

I will win the race life has given me, I'll overcome every hurdle and reach the finish line with a smile on my face.

Thanks very much.

"Slowly but surely"

Raúl Fuentes

Age: 16

I want to take full advantage of this chance to tell you a little about my life. I've had a happy family life, with some difficulties, but with support from my relatives, friends and teachers I have experienced many things, some of them great fun.

My name is Raúl and I started studying at a special school for the blind and partially sighted named after Abel Santamaría Cuadrado. The school is part of an educational complex where you can study from primary education all the way through to pre-university.

At the school I learnt to write in braille, the reading and writing system used by people like me who cannot see.

I made a lot of friends at the school and I had a close friendship with them. Apart from studying we used to play in our free time and it was good fun playing hide and seek because when someone was hiding the person who was seeking used to walk past him more than a hundred times until he finally found him.

I started swimming at this school and took part in competitions at different levels. I spent seven years there and I can assure you I really enjoyed it.

After I finished my primary education, and taking advantage of the fact that I had been given a place at the National Swimming School,

I asked my parents if I could attend it and face the challenge of going to a school where the rest of the students had no visual impairment. That's when I began to mix entirely with sighted people, so I had to teach them to help me with orientation and, among other things, make them get used to the noise of my brailler.

In addition, as I was the first student at the school with this kind of disability the teachers weren't sure how to teach me, but they did everything they could. Some of them even learnt braille, but I wasn't happy with that because it meant they could check my exams and correct my spelling mistakes.

As I told you earlier, it was a school for swimming, so I spent most of my time training. Did I hit the sides of the pool? At first I did a few times. Well, in fact I was covered with bumps and scratches, and I looked more like a boxer than a swimmer!

At this time I was doing my swimming training, competing and studying piano in my free time, and this was how I began to get involved in the wonderful world of music. This enabled me to sit the entry exams for the National School of Arts and, luckily, I was accepted as a student.

When I went to the school at first I was a little disorientated since it was a completely new place for me; I used to bump into all the pillars and fall over every step or gap in the place. However, I wasn't the only one who was lost; the other students also took their time to get used to walking along the school corridors with me, so I used to hit them with my cane all the time.

As you know, I am at the intermediate level in my piano studies, and I am also teaching myself to play the guitar because it's easier to take along to parties and make new friends. I have to confess it has also helped me get to know so many female friends.

I am very happy with the chances I have been given to overcome my disability and show children, whether they share my disability or not, that with everyone's help we can do the same things as them, and even more; as long as there is the opportunity to be trained, co-operation, teachers and centres of education where we can develop and learn just like any other child.

I can tell you now some friends and I have a project to set up a band; we have started to write songs and we are rehearsing with a view to our first public appearance.

Having been mainstreamed from secondary school until now (I am studying year two of pre-university education), I can tell you almost all my male and female friends are fully sighted and my relationship with them is marvellous. Having said that, I still have some very good friends from the special school where I started my schooling.

I hope these few words have helped you to get to know me better, and I would like to invite you to come and get to know my country and all the good things it has for people like me with visual impairment. You can also come with me and my friends to one of the parties we have where we sing on the karaoke machine. I can assure you my friends are all great fun and my female friends are all beautiful and great talkers.

As you can see, I have been quite busy during my short life. It has been full of challenges I have been able to face up to thanks, first of all, to great support from my family but also, and very importantly, thanks to support from my teachers, who have had the hardest task because it was their first experience of teaching a blind child.

I am aware that anything I am capable of achieving will be good for me, but it will also be good for people like me who have this kind of disability because they can point to me and prove that with family support, a good education from teachers and our own personal effort we can reach any goals we set ourselves.

If you will allow me, to finish I would like to show you some of the sentences I made up myself and that a lot of my family and friends find really funny:

—At first touch I can't find anything.

—Excuse me; can you get out of the way? I can't see the television.

—I haven't had anything to eat for a while and I'm so hungry I can't see.

—Sir, I can't see the blackboard from the back of the class here.

—Oh, sorry, I didn't see you —I was looking the other way.





Caribbean Sea

Cuba

Haiti

DOMINICAN
REPUBLIC

Santo Domingo

Caribbean Sea



Mariela Díaz Ramírez

Age: 14

When I was two years old I started attending early intervention at the "National School of the Blind", and when I was four I went to boarding school there. I learnt to read braille during first year and this enabled me to start studying year three of primary education when I was seven.

When I was eight I was a normal student in the mainstream education programme. Knowing that I was going to a mainstream school with sighted people and teachers who didn't know braille terrified me, but I was excited by the challenge and, hoping to be welcomed in the class, I began year four in basic education at the "Maranatha Evangelical School", where I studied from year four to year seven in basic education. For year eight, with my head held high, a merit diploma for my studies and proud of everything I had achieved, I moved on to a new centre of education, the "Basic School for Progress". At first it was difficult to get a place because they said they had no trained staff and I was a special case.

However, with help from my family and support from the field teachers from the National School of the Blind, which is now called "Olga Estrella Educational Resource Centre for the Visually Impaired", I completed year eight. During this year my aspirations changed considerably; I began to take an interest in computing,

English, reading, writing and working on my singing skills. The following year I faced a new challenge; starting my pre-university studies and dealing with adolescence.

I studied the first year in pre-university education at the "Harvard Study School" and year two at the "Evenecer Evangelical School". I am now studying year three at the "Media Melba Vález de Erazo Centre of Excellence"

I was granted a merit award for my studies three years running at the "Olga Estrella Educational Resource Centre for the Visually Impaired", and the first lady of the Republic presented me with a computer in recognition of my merit on December 2nd 2005. I recently graduated as a voluntary soldier and I was granted special recognition as the first blind person to graduate from voluntary military service. I was honoured to have the chance to present a bunch of flowers and a plaque to the General of the Dominican Air Force.

My most important experience as a teenager has been the opportunity to share with blind people and learn from them. At the same time I try to do the best I can to make my knowledge useful, and of course as a teenager I also have a good time and play.

I know I am limited because of my visual impairment, but every day I meet people who help me to forget about them and I feel this makes my life more trivial.

I would like to say I am a normal girl in terms of my everyday life. I try to show I can sing, laugh, dance and act in all the school plays we put on.

Having a good time and enjoying myself makes people I come across curious, and they ask me how I write and how I live my life without becoming ridden by complexes because of my disability.

In my local community I get on well with people and, although they make me angry sometimes with all their questions, I have learnt, through time, to control my emotions. At my school I was chosen to take part in the "Reading Olympics" as class representative. I have read 90 works of literature and I face the difficult but exciting challenge of reading 100 more. I am writing a book called "I'm a teenager", a piece about christmas called "Darleny, learn to be happy" and a children's tale called "Nadia in the Enchanted Garden".

I consider myself a fun, happy girl, sure of my opinions, realistic, to the point and capable of recognising my mistakes. I like to read and write, cook and think about things that happen to me in my daily life and I love computing and speaking English. In the future I would like to study psychology and publish books about personal excellence.

The most amazing thing I have witnessed is that some people feel pity and compassion when they see me for the first time. When they get to know me better their feelings change and they begin to admire me. Noticing this, in one of my pieces I wrote something I will never tire of repeating: I am full of pride when I write, and I am not afraid to confess that I cannot see from outside, only listen, but with the eyes of my soul I can look at those things that reach the deepest part of my heart and become a beautiful song

that teaches me a lesson, accompanies me now and will remain with me in the future to remind me there is colour inside me.

The things I see clearly today are not visible to the eye of the person who does not want to learn that the horror or beauty that is within him does not matter; what matters is understanding that god has placed inside you the best thing you will find in life, if you learn to look with the light in your heart. That light will never go out if you extend your hand to the person who needs love.

Since the day I plucked up the courage to write these words from the bottom of my heart, this is the message I want to give out to anyone who doesn't know that we blind people can excel, find success, have feelings, find happiness and live, enjoying life just like everyone else.



Banjul • GAMBIA

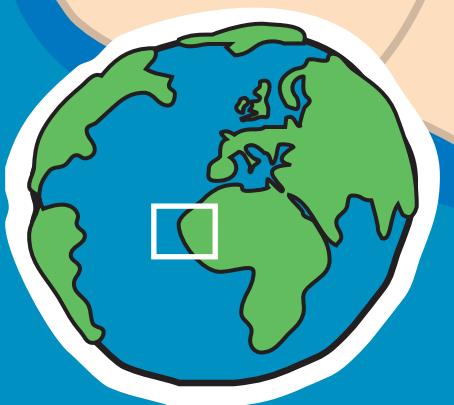
Senegal

Guinea-Bissau

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Sierra Leone

South
Atlantic
Ocean



Demba Njuke

Age: 16

Visual impairment is a situation where the eyes are incapable of functioning. To this there are levels or degree of severity. Mine is a total lost of sight. I am blind, a Gambian and 16 years of age.

At the age of 11 years old, I stopped benefiting from the use of my eyes. The beautiful sights of nature that I used to enjoy all ceased to exist. The blue sky, the trees and birds that I used to see, all disappeared. When I think of myself, there is always a question that lingers in my mind. "When shall I see again"? The answer to this question is "NEVER". This fearful answer always makes me cry. But the conditions in which I am do not keep me apart. I have hobbies that keep me away from stresses such as singing, dancing and reading in the sunshine.

At home I live with my father, mother, sister, and brothers. Happiness and sadness are facts found in nature. Sometimes I feel very happy because god had given me good health and both of my parents are alive. Sometimes I become sad when I think of my disability. Sitting separately and so quiet makes my parents very confused about me. They will ask why I am so quiet or if there is something wrong with me. These touching questions show how loving and caring they are to me. These sorts of questions always

trigger me to crack jokes and burst into laughter in order to cast their doubts away.

However, my life before was quite different from now because I know that I am growing fast and my needs are changing. My mother always tells me, "Demba. you are a man and you spend the whole day doing nothing". Her sentiments of advice know they are all factual, but they are deeply factual. Thinking of what I am at times gives me stress and makes me cry.

Consequently, I tried to go to school for many years. One day I went to the Essau Primary School to ask them how best I could join them to learn. I was not attended to. I cried and went back home. Fortunately, one day I was sitting on our veranda with my mother. Then two teachers from the primary school came to visit me. They greeted us and said they were looking for Demba. I could clearly hear their voices, but could never see them. As they continued speaking their voices became clear. The purpose of their visit was to extend the message of how interested I am towards education to my mother. My mother was very impressed and asked me to take a final decision. I did not waste a minute in making up my mind. The education sector is the last hope from which lies many opportunities for me in the future.

Apart from that my first day in school was a bitter experience. It took me so long to adjust and cooperate with the students. The classroom activities are full of competition and illustrations on the blackboard. This I can hear very well from the sound of chalk during the teacher's explanation. Not all teachers are well trained

in giving special attention to visually impaired people like me. But I am so lucky that the teachers in the upper basic school are always ready to give me special attention in class. This they do by making sure I have understood their lesson thoroughly before they leave the class. When going to school my younger sister used to hold my hand to show me the way. After school I have a friend who is always by my side ready to help me. But sometimes I feel very comfortable by walking alone without assistance from friends.

Nevertheless I also live in a very big community. A community full of different kinds of people (good and bad). In the street I'm used to doing many things on my own. I can fetch water from the tap and buy anything I need from the shop. I can also ride a bicycle in an open space, especially in the football field.

Additionally, sometimes when walking alone I make noise for people to guide and feel my presence. In the street I come across good and bad people. Experience being the best teacher does not give the bad ones a chance to taste the difficulties of being blind. At times they will leave me to fall into holes and bump into stumps. The number of times I went home with blood stained on my clothes are uncountable. There are a good number of my peers who cannot cooperate with a blind person. In decision making they will laugh at me and give bad proclamations like "You don't know yourself" or "You better take yourself where you belong". At times when I speak they will exclaim, "You are the last one to talk".

Life is full of ups and downs, but living with ups and downs with your correct eyes is quite different from being blind. Definitely I am

living in a different world of darkness. Day and night always come in the dark. The colour of my face will ever remain a question. The beauties of nature, the colours of the rainbow: red, orange, green and so on...I always hear but have never seen. Do they really exist?

Fatoumatta Jallow

Age: 15

All human beings are created by almighty god. He made us the way he wanted. So, for that matter, we are different from each other with respect to our qualities, characteristics and behaviour. It is these features that influence the way human beings are being regarded in society.

I am Fatoumatta Jallow, a visually impaired teenage girl, a Gambian by nationality, a country found in West Africa. I am very much glad for my unique privileged experience as a visually impaired teenager.

However, I went through both sides of life. The difficulties and the good times which I have experienced —I would like to start with the difficult ones.

When I was less than ten years old my eyes were operated on due to vision problems. I was then enrolled in primary school with them due to my condition. I had to withdraw and went back to the village to my mother. After a year in the village, I returned to the city to stay with my stepmother, but she could not accommodate me due to my condition that I may be a burden, so my brother took up the responsibility of taking care of me. He therefore enrolled me in St. Mary's Primary School, but unfortunately he died four months later.

There was no option for me than to go back and stay with my mother in the village again, but because I am determined to learn I encouraged my mother to send me to school in the village. I could not stay there either because rural teachers were not trained to handle me.

However, things began to change this time positively for me. I was enrolled in GOVI Resource Centre for the Blind in 2002. Because of my experience from my former school, learning became less difficult. I graduated from GOVI resource centre in 2007 and I am now integrated in a mainstream school called Tallinding Upper Basic School. In this school I do better than many sighted students in the class.

Therefore I am taking this opportunity to appeal to philanthropists, benevolent organizations and society at large to assist and support people like me so as not to become a social misfit tomorrow. We need to be independent and self reliant.

Pateh Kebbeh

Age: 16

My name is Pateh Kebbeh, a grade 7 student attending Old Yundum Upper Basic School. I was born in 1991 in a village called Sara-Kunda in the Sabach-Sanjal District in the Republic of the Gambia.

I was only nine months old when I was struck by a mysterious disease called measles which left me permanently blind. As time passed, my parents realized that I was blind, because I was unable to have eye contact with them and I was not smiling from their friendly approaches as they soothed my chins —teasing with affection.

I grew up imitating the voices of those around me most of the time. My movements were limited to the backyard of our compound, where I learnt to imitate the sounds of birds, dogs, cats, donkeys and horses while everyone worked on the farms. During these hours of parental absence I would be left under the care of my grandmother who was so weak that she had to support herself with a walking stick.

My day's food was always put beside my bed and the drinking water was the open jars out beside the round hut I lived in. Most of the time I went hungry for the food was not properly placed,

instead cats or dogs would have the food as their regular meals. Sometimes the container of the food was knocked over by my legs as I stretched my hands to search the way. When this happened, I either gathered the food and put everything back in the container or ate it once and for all.

At night, there used to be drumming, dancing and wrestling at the village Bantaba. I never got the chance of attending one. I was always deprived from joining my peers and I became ignorant of my own cultural values.

I felt the situation in which I found myself was just the same for everyone. However, I sometimes questioned myself about certain things such as death. I came to understand the word death through a collection of voices crying when my grandmother's name was mentioned. I was quickly moved from the house to stay with my mother's relatives, wondering what was wrong with my grandmother.

I cannot remember all the troubles of rejecting and marginalization I had faced but I remember my late grandmother who inspired me. We prayed and socialized together as both of us lived in loneliness.

Having suffered from a poor and unhappy childhood, at the age of eleven I was enrolled at Campama School for the Blind through the intervention of Ramou Riley upon her routine visits in the up country scouting for deprived visually impaired people and coming to their aid. It was at this school where I learnt a form of manual reading and writing with a braille machine. The teachers were given the task of teaching my closed mind and helping to give

meaning to my life. The first step taken was to make me behave reasonably and obediently. Words were related to what was around me. The word is spelt as I feel the object. I can remember spelling the word water as my teacher poured water over my head. Since then I learnt to spell and understand water. From this moment, my progress was becoming rapid and later I was moved to GOVI (Gambia Organization for the Visually Impaired).

At GOVI I learnt to make progress in all my subjects, including daily living skills, mobility and orientation, etc.

Now that I am in grade 7, being not only intelligent but full of humour and warmth as well, people, especially my peers, are continually amazed by my understanding.

I thank god and all those who contributed to rescuing me and many others out of this hopeless darkness, sacrificing their entire lives in building our capacities to meet the challenges of life through independent means rather than living on handouts.

Burkina Faso

Benin

Ivory Coast

GHANA

Togo

Accra



South
Atlantic
Ocean



Adama Halidu

Age: 14

I was born on a Friday in April. I was five years old when I became blind and life was very difficult for me. I could not move alone and my fellow children who led me sometimes let me fall into gutters. Anytime I was moving alone and fell into a gutter they laughed at me.

I wanted to go to school, but my parents did not know that there was a school for the blind. I was nine years old when they got to know the school and therefore sent me for admission. At first, people in my village thought it was useless for my parents to send me to school. They felt that once someone is blind, he or she cannot reason nor do any work and can only beg for alms to survive.

At school I did not find life easy. At first, because I could not move about alone. However, I made some friends and gradually through their help I could move about freely without any help.

I am now fourteen years old and we are five in class. Last year we were fourteen in my class and I got the fourth position in our promotion exams. I want to get the first position in our next exams, so I am working harder. I want to be a lawyer in the future, so that I can fight for the disabled.

Ebenezer Agetba

Age: 15

I was born in a poor village in the upper east region of Ghana to Mr and Mrs Agetba. My parents are peasant farmers. I was not born blind but I became blind when I was seven years old.

I was in class too. Then one day I was playing with a friend and he threw sand into my eyes. My parents sent me to hospital, but they were told that nothing could be done to save my sight.

Hence I was sent to a school for the blind to continue my education. When it first happened, I could see a little bit, but eventually became totally blind. I was very sad I did not enjoy life at all. My parents were very poor. People in my village mocked and teased me whenever I associated with them, especially mates of my age. They saw me to be a social misfit unable to do any work at all.

I did not have a single friend because of my situation. Children stoned me day in and day out. I found it difficult to move to other parts of the village. My parents left the village for Kumasi to work for a living and left me in the care of my grandmother. They travelled with my other siblings and left me because they saw me to be a burden. I find life very difficult with my grandmother because I do not enjoy my parents' care anymore.

Whenever I am on holiday from school, she feels I have no books to study and therefore she forces me to follow other children in the family who do not attend school to the bush for grazing. In the bush I am always illtreated by the other children. For instance, they always whip me with a cane and ask me to also run after them and whip them. So, whenever I am in school I feel happy, but during holidays I become sad.

At the moment, I am in class for mobility training. I can move about freely without the help of anybody. Whenever I go back to my village, the people are always surprised at the way I walk about alone, wash my clothes, dress nicely, speak English, etc., but I do not feel comfortable because since my parents left me I have never seen them again as well as my two brothers and sisters. They have never sent me any gift to show that they think of me.

My performance at school is very encouraging and at the village I always read stories in braille and other books including mathematics. Now the school children in the village like me whenever I go home. They are always surprised at the way I read and share ideas with them. I wish to become a teacher in the future, because I admire the blind teachers in my school and the love they have for the blind children in the school.

Elias Kodelogo

Age: 13

I was born in a small village called Nayagniah in the upper region of Ghana. I became blind when I was one year old and my parents took care of me very well.

I was sent for treatment and I became partially sighted. I was sent to school with my brothers but I could not write. I was not happy at all. My parents provided all my needs for me in order to make me happy. However, they did not know that there is a school for the blind pupils because of the distance of the school from my village. I was always afraid to go outside and play with other children because I thought they would laugh at me and others would hit me.

My parents do not allow me to do any work at all. Whenever we went to farm and I wanted to join my siblings in weeding my parents quickly took the hoe from me and asked me to sit down and pluck groundnuts instead. One day I surprised them by weeding grass on the farm and they praised me very much.

A teacher heard about me and directed them to take me to a school for the blind. My parents were very happy and quickly bought all my needs and took me to the school at the age of eight. At the end of my first year at school, my performance was very good and my parents were joyful.

Now I am thirteen years old. I want to always make my parents and teachers proud of me, so I do not play with my studies. I want to become a lawyer in the future so that I can fight for the rights of the disabled.

Sandra Birikorong

Age: 14

Children's rights can be referred to as the privileges or benefits the child enjoys. Some rights of the child are right to life, education and information. Others are protection, fair trial, dignity (respect), to mention but a few.

In my community (Mampong) most of the children are denied their rights consciously or unconsciously. Most of the children are not sent to school and even the schooled ones are made to work to earn money for the upkeep of the family. A child has to make some sales before he/she can have his/her breakfast. Woe betide that child if he/she complains of hunger and is reluctant to carry out that duty; he/she receives severe beatings and is even made to go hungry the whole day. This is referred to as child labour according to the UN charter and is against the rights of the child.

I am in a community in that part of Ghana where the voices of children are not heard. The adults are with this adage: "children are not to be heard but always do the listening". This I think is not right, because every living soul has the right to speak and express himself/herself, including children. Children are made timid, insignificant and inferior in society when they are not given the opportunity to bring out their grievances, problems, needs and opinions about issues concerning them.

Some biblical sayings are sometimes misquoted which also look down upon the rights of the child. For example, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord...". I have witnessed a clear case about a friend, who was told to get luggage off the trunk of a car and take it to the house by his parents. The boy later found out that the luggage was too heavy for him to carry. He told the parents about it and there was a stranger who shouted to the boy, and I quote, "leave here and do the work". The parents indeed also drove the child to do what he was asked to do. Isn't that cruel?

People in my community think they are doing their wards a lot of good by sending them to relatives, friends and to people they don't even know much about to spend holidays or completely stay with them. These children are most often molested, harassed and brutalized in all forms. These children are left without security, protection, love and affection from parents.

Children's hopes, dreams and aspirations wouldn't be short-lived if the rights of the child are made known to the general public.



Navjot Purewal

Age: 16

Blind people can do anything

Using my cane I cross streets safely
I walk safely around obstacles
What more can you expect from a blind person?
Well, you can expect a lot

Because blindness doesn't stop you from doing anything
Blind people can be singers making up beautiful songs
They can be artists making dishes out of clay
They could also be teachers, teaching others and giving them knowledge

So follow your dreams and see what happens
Following your dreams can get you really far
At least that is what I believe and have heard
Some people follow their dreams and they become singers

Others don't really think about their dreams, even though they could,
but they still can get jobs they like
So remember
even though you are blind you can do anything.

Vibhu Sharma

Age: 15

This article is subscribed to put across the difference between the policy making and its implementation by those responsible for representing the interest of the disabled. It also intends to address the demands and needs of the children.

Being a visually impaired person myself, I put forth my own experiences, twists and turns. Living in a society where official apathy continues and instead of help, a child with impaired vision is often taken as a disturbance and is ignored. This is in spite of the recommendations and assurances for support to the leading schools by the associations and societies who have come forward to help the visually challenged children.

It is important for everyone to be educated. There have been vast changes in the perception of society. It has been realised that blind and visually impaired children can lead a normal life if they have access to rehabilitation services such as intervention, education, vocational training, employment and the availability of aids and appliances.

The government of India, through its constitution, has ensured the right to equality for all the citizens and has protected them by prohibition of discrimination. The constitution provides education as a right for all children aged 6-14 years. India is a signatory to

the declaration on full participation and equality of people and also participates in the U.N. Convention on Protection of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disability.

However, official apathy continues and most schools seem not to care less about such students. Parents of students with special needs have harrowing time getting wards admitted to school. Rude behaviour of teachers of common schools goes to the extent of asking the parents to reason for the education for their child. Once admitted the teachers, instead of helping the child, often show no sign of adjustment and feel the child is a disturbance and is ignored. I recall my tough time while seeking an admission in a regular school and know peers helped by their seniors.

The most challenging problem for blind or impaired vision children occurs when it comes to education. Refusal of the admission due to the problems of reading and writing, checking the examination books, class and home work, ignoring the technology available. In India school children are even slapped due to the disability of reading the book. Sometime the teachers of the common schools ask the parents to send their child to a school for the mentally retarded.

Lack of adequate school infrastructure, quality of education and education system being disabled-unfriendly further add to the problems of the visually impaired children. The poor enforcement of law affects the basic services.

The policies and commitments of the government of India and the education system in India are disabled-unfriendly. India adopted the

U.N. Convention on the Right of the Child in 1992 and continuously started improving the education system. The Rehabilitation Council of India act was passed in 1992. This act enabled manpower for the purpose of providing education to all disabled children.

The Persons with Disability (P.W.D.) act was enacted in 1995. The object of the act was to fix responsibilities with regard to services for disabled persons and to ensure every child with disability has access to free and adequate education till the age of 18. The government announced its National Plan of Action and National Policy for Persons with Disability. The national policy recognises that there is need to create an environment to provide equal opportunities, protection and right of participation for disabled people.

There are national institutes for rehabilitation for visual disabilities like the National Institute of Visually Handicapped Dehradun, National Association of Blind New Delhi and National Association of Blind Mumbai, besides many other N.G.O.s available in South India in and around urban areas. But the services in the rural areas are not available, where according to a survey 3 out of 5 disabled children in the age group 0-9 years are reported to be visually impaired.

In the metropolitan cities of India the concept of inclusive education is adopted by the leading schools like Delhi Public School, Ryan International School, Blue Bells and Modern School, etc., in Delhi, and about 200-400 schools in the country have started admitting blind and visually impaired students. These schools are successfully

providing education in the general classroom with the help of teachers, non-disabled students and parents as well to visually challenged students.

Through cooperative learning approaches and interaction between the disabled child and all entities in the school, the disabled children are proving their ability and talent. The support services given by fully qualified teachers for material support and academic support to the students and classroom teacher also help the performance of disabled children. The school also looks into the medical, social, counselling and sponsorship arrangements for the visually impaired student.

As a member of the U.N. Convention on Disability the government has improved the general education system through Inclusive Education, Sarvar Shiksha Abhiyan (S.S.A.) launched by the government. The goal is that by 2010 all children, including the sightless, in the age group of 6-14 years will have elementary schooling. Every child with disability will have secondary level education. Special care will be taken to:

- Make school buildings accessible for all disabilities.
- Medium and method of teaching will be adopted as per the requirements.
- Teaching/learning tools and aides like braille/talking books/appropriate software, e-libraries etc., will be provided.
- Personal mobility through aides and appliances and personal communication through electronic devices will be enhanced.

- Inclusive education promoted through the Persons with Disability Act protects the right of the disabled child. As per the act, the central and state governments shall ensure that every child has free and adequate education till the age of 18.
- The Rehabilitation Council of India will ensure systematic human resource development.

More than 75% of disabled are found in the rural areas in India. The special schools as well as inclusive education programs are only a few in number and cannot serve all disabled children. Therefore, to provide equal education to all the opportunities should be made available to children in the rural areas also.

There should be awareness that children with impaired vision can do as well as non-disabled children. Although general schools are opening their doors to children with visual disability, and more and more children are being enrolled, India will be able to achieve education for all only when the concept of inclusive education is absorbed in the general education system. The government should look into the following:

- Early detection and prevention of disability.
- Rehabilitation services.
- International cooperation.
- Employment for persons with disability, especially for human resource development for the disabled.
- Assistive devices and services based on needs.

- Collection of regular information on persons with disability and monitoring progress.

The media has an important role to play for the proper development of the environment and information for the betterment of the disabled persons. The government should take necessary steps to create awareness about the benefits, facilities and opportunities available for sightless children. The communication needs of the sightless should be addressed through making information services accessible.

Human resource development to meet the trained personnel required for the training and guidance to the blind sightless children should be undertaken. To meet the requirements of education for the children under inclusive education, special education, home-based education, pre-school etc., necessary training programs should be developed. Needs-based instruction should be adopted and followed.

All education efforts should be child-centred and should be designed for the enhancement of the natural power and ability of the individual child. All children learn best in the company of their peers. In fact, non-disabled children are the best teachers for enabling disabled children to develop proper concepts. Child-to-child learning also becomes relevant in India where there are 40-45 students in a classroom.

Personal capabilities of sightless children could be enhanced if assistive devices and personal mobility are enhanced through aides and appliances which are regularly upgraded. The world

of computers has changed the lives of the visually impaired. Disability-friendly IT software, braille, tape-service, large print and other technologies like Jaws used by the children should be made available at a concession.

It is also desired that the state transport undertaking and railways should provide barrier-free vehicles and coaches for the convenience of the sightless. They should also make the platforms, buildings and other facilities barrier-free.

Life is a process of ongoing struggle and visual disability needs to be understood. God, on the basis of equability and impartiality, has blessed every disabled child with 4 out of 5 senses to cope with the deficiency of the fifth. Technology has opened avenues to overcome difficulties. The struggle is not over till its over. So let us appeal to:

Government: For enforcement and implementation of policies and program.

Parents: For keeping up with struggle.

Doctors: For their best and create positivism.

Rehabilitation Specialists: For making available the best assistive devices.

Teachers: For having experimental attitude towards the children.





Bita Roshandoony

Age: 17

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

I am 17 years old, I am studying computer engineering at the University of Tehran, and I also studied computers in high school.

I think the main problem that we have in our country is the fact that the sighted in our society don't know about us and our abilities.

We don't have any choice in studying the major we like. We should study just law, literature, and similar things. If we want to study math, nobody would support us because we don't have any books available. My friend and I studied computing with a lot of problems. We didn't have any books at all.

The organization planned to make those books available as tapes before the exams, but they were given to us at end of the term. All throughout the term, we didn't have any books.

The other problem is that we don't have the authority to select if we want to work in a firm as an operator or teacher, or become a lawyer. The question is; who employs blind people?

The people who have the power and authority should be urged to make us known throughout society, and provide us with more equipment.

And the other things that can be a problem are:

All things for our computers are expensive.

If we want to buy screen readers or printers, it costs a lot. But I have heard in other countries blind people get free equipment or they pay less money.

I hope things improve.

Parham Doustdar

Age: 17

I lost my sight completely when I was eight months old, but the reason is not yet clear, the most likely being the marriage of my parents despite them being related. I started to learn to play the keyboard at the age of three, and was examined in Spain by Professor Barraquer in 1994. I was told to return to him when I was eighteen, but I'm still trying to contact him to see whether I should visit him now.

At the age of eight I started learning piano, and during some time, I took courses of carving into wood, and alike. At the age of sixteen, after finishing ninth grade, there came the time in which I should select what major I wanted to study. The high school major the blind can take and safely study in Iran is human science, but because of my special dislike towards that subject, I started to study math. I studied for two years despite not having any books, and my grades were average although I was taught during the one last month of the last term usually.

Finally, I found out that I could not take the national exam to enter the university if my studying continued that way. So I took another type of national exam which gave me a higher chance to get accepted. I got accepted into a university in Tehran (the

capital), and I have to get another diploma besides the one I've got for math, simply because there were no books to study.

At the age of sixteen, also I got my TTC (Teacher Training Course) degree from Cambridge for English. And as the final accomplishment I mention, I became the top handicapped pianist of Iran at the age of eleven. The contest was never held again, so I could never take part from that day on.

The inconvenience the blind face, at a brief glance...

If you pick up a notebook and a pen, and go to each blind person in a city, or even a country, you would hear about their problems. But, in my opinion, they mostly come from one problem, which is the core:

Within a town, or a village, or a city, there would be places that have a lot of equipment for the blind. Accessible streets, sidewalks, blind equipment shops, etc. But, on the other hand, there would be places which have none of those things.

In a country —mostly those that are capitalist— the capital would have lots of accessibility for disabled people, but there would be places which do not know anything about being disabled. Every now and then in Iran, we hear about parents, mothers and fathers, who leave their children because they're disabled, or lock them up in the house, or even worse, in a room! I'm aware that this problem does not exist only in my country but, of course, I don't know about the depth of it in other countries.

What is clear, though, is that all of these problems exist because we do not provide equal services for disabled people. Let's look at a bigger example.

I have friends in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and countries alike, and when I come to compare the services they get as blind people (not to mention other disabled people), I see a great distance. A great hole in between. That's because there are companies that provide the blind with equipment. Talking scales, education equipment, etc., whereas in countries that are considered "far off" like Iran, Afghanistan, and other countries, even ones in Africa, there's almost nothing in comparison.

There are several solutions to the kind of worldwide problems like the one mentioned above, the most effective being the fact that those companies can overcome the political differences, the political barriers, and export their products all over the world. It'd be good for them because they would simply get more income, and it'd be good for the disabled, because they would get the equipment they need. Certainly, politics shouldn't stop that process in any way, because the disabled, whose needs differ from other people, simply shouldn't get involved in it.

Cuba

Caribbean Sea



JAMAICA

Kingston

Caribbean Sea



Andrew Gentles

Age: 14

I attend the Salvation Army School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. As a blind teenager life can be quite challenging. I have had a lot of bad and some good experiences. I know that in life everybody has ups and downs. This is one of my good experiences.

It all started at a birthday party. My friend Marshal was celebrating and he made me feel welcome. My mother and I went to one of the far corners of the room. My cousin brought over her three friends and told them to introduce themselves. They sounded as if they were twelve and thirteen.

The first one asked me my name and I told her. Then she asked if I went to school. I told her I did. She wanted to know which school I attended. When she heard about the school for the blind she began to ask about the children that attended my school and I gave her all the information she wanted about my school. My cousin and her two friends left us together, and I asked her name. After she told me her name, she wanted to know if I could travel on the road by myself. I told her I used a cane to get around. She asked if I wanted to join her at the second table for the feast. I agreed and joined her.

As we ate I had a feeling that she was watching me. She said I did not eat like a person who was blind. She asked if I could do

things like cooking. I told her that I could mix cornflakes, make cup soup, make frankfurters, and make Milo. Before we parted we exchanged numbers. I felt really good because many sighted persons would not be that nice to someone who is blind.

I am going to tell you about one of my worst experience as a blind person. It happened one Sunday when I had to go to church alone. I sat beside some boys who were talking. When they realized that I was blind, one of the boys turned to me and said in a quiet whisper "What is your name?". When I told him he laughed and mocked me because of my blindness. Some of his other friends came over and began teasing me about things that made me feel really embarrassed. They asked some humiliating things such as if when I ate if I had to feel all over my face in order to find my mouth. I decided that I would go back home.

On my way home I heard the boys say, "See the blind boy there. Let's do something to him". They started calling me names. The one who asked me my name said in a cold voice, "Stone him". I tried to run away and ran into a gravestone, and fell. A woman came and rescued me.

As a blind person travelling on the road can be scary and frightening. I had my first mobility lesson on the road when I was 13. My mobility teacher gave me tips about what to expect. Crossing the road was the most challenging. I got very scared when I listened, especially the big trucks.

My father thinks that I can see much more than I really can and expects me to do things perfectly. On the other hand my mother

is much more patient. For example, my father teaches me to do things in the way he would teach someone who sees normally. However, my mother understands that a blind person needs special attention, and is more patient when teaching me. My mother is a big help in preparing me for the world. She takes me out so that I can socialize.

The people in my mother's community treat me with respect and we get on very well. We go shopping together, play football, swim, watch television and ride bicycles.

I would like to share an experience about how my neighbours came to my rescue. I was alone at home and in the process of taking some food from the pot, when the pot fell over and spilled all the food on the floor. I ran and called my neighbour Jody, and she came with her grandmother to my rescue. The members of my community are kind and thoughtful. They do not pass me without saying hello, and they invite me to dinner sometimes.

So you see life for a visually impaired teenager can be difficult at time. On the other hand life can be fun. Although some people who see normally do not think that persons who are blind can have normal lives, from experience I can say blind people do get along in the world and can be just as happy.

Zambia

Tanzania

MALAWI

Lilongwe

Lake
Nyasa

Mozambique



Yamikani Tagaluka

Age: 15

Life for a visually impaired child in my country is a struggle! A continuous struggle for survival. They are less likely to survive and more likely to be abandoned, to suffer discrimination, violence and sexual abuse, to be excluded from education, to be unable to get married and to be excluded from participation in society. I am Yamikani Tagaluka, and I come from a country called Malawi. Born on 10th August 1992, I happen to be the second born in a family of four. I was born partially sighted among brothers and sisters who are all sighted.

Malawi is a small landlocked country of 12 million people with an annual growth rate of 1.9%. Over 87% of this population resides in the rural communities. Malawi's economy is weak, so much so that for the past 10 years the cost of living has tremendously gone beyond the majority of the population who earn less than a dollar per day.

National Scale of Blindness & Child Education

The total Malawi population with disabilities revealed by the 1998 Population and Housing Census conducted by the National Statistics Office is 4.2%. It further revealed that 54% of people with

disabilities are males while females make up 46%. The rural-urban distribution of the disabled population is 3% for rural areas and 1.2% for urban. The disability population is distributed as follows:

- 18.2% for physical disability
- 20.5% for visually impaired
- 8.5% for intellectually impaired
- 13.3% for impaired hearing
- 18.8% for epilepsy
- 4.5% for asthma, and
- 16.2% account for other disabilities.

42% of the population with disabilities is of school going age (i.e. 5-13 years). The census revealed that only 37% of the children with disabilities of school going age were enrolled in 1998, compared to 78% national enrolment rate.

It is estimated that Malawi has a population of children (0-15 years) with total visual impairment of 5,300 and 15,900 with low vision, adding up to 21,200 children.

The national enrolment of visually impaired children in schools is 4,665 (year 2000), representing 22% of the total population of children with visual impairment. This is comparably low for the nation since the average national enrolment rate for the year 2000 was 78% with 77% for boys and 79% for girls and that the average enrolment rate for children with disabilities is 37%. Of the enrolled visually impaired children, 2,132 (45%) are girls and 2,533 (55%) are boys, which therefore means that the net enrolment rate for boys is 19% and 23% for girls.

Inaccessible system of education

Just like an ordinary Malawian child, I entered primary school when I was six years old. My mum told me that there was no option for me but to enrol in a regular primary school where I was forced to attend classes together with my sighted peers. This had a disastrous effect on my life. I was literally unable to follow what was being taught in class as the lessons were not modified to suit my needs. As if this was not enough, my class teacher would always give me assignments in printed format. I was indeed a perpetual failure in class. This did not only affect my self-esteem but also my attitude towards education. More often than not I was absent from school as I saw no need of going to class where I would just sit idle. I went through junior primary school without benefiting at all.

A life-changing experience

In the heat of my problems with primary education, I met one Ezekiel Kumwenda, a blind primary school teacher and an outspoken activist for the rights and needs of the blind and visually impaired people in our country. Kumwenda had just been assigned to teach at our school. It was my first time to see a blind person speaking English, let alone teaching. It was also my first time to see a blind person reading and writing in a format called braille. I honestly had never heard about braille before. What I saw in this teacher changed my attitude towards blindness in general and my visual impairment in particular. I had always wanted to talk to Mr. Kumwenda to share with him my problems. I just had a feeling that he was going to assist and I was just right. When I met him

one morning, he showed me a special interest which I had never been shown before. His response was wonderful. He promised me that he was going to link me to a school for the blind where I would learn braille. I immediately moved to Montfort School for the Blind where I completed my primary school education. I developed a special interest for education. I also learnt the art of interacting with my peers.

It never rains for me but it pours

It indeed never rains but it pours. No sooner had I just got selected to secondary school than I was hit by another problem. This time around it was a family crisis. My parents had separated and my father had abandoned the family home and married a new wife. The reason for their separation was ME. I am told he was not happy that my mum bore him a visually impaired child and that he did not want the mistake repeated. I honestly had guilty feelings. I almost cursed God for having created me with a disability. I also harboured feelings of jealousy for my non-disabled peers. The absence of my dad's presence meant that my hopes for education were shattered. There was no one to pay for my school fees. My mum could not afford it and none of her relatives could. Efforts to contact my father proved futile as he was incommunicado. Again I was on the verge of completely abandoning education. What else could I do?

A new way of school support

While all my hopes for education were completely shattered, I remembered Ezekiel Kumwenda, the blind teacher. I recalled the words of encouragement he used to give me, particularly how he valued education. I then decided to approach him again with my problem. Again Mr. Kumwenda was so helpful. He told me of the existence of a special program that offered loans to parents of children with disabilities. When I told my mum about it she didn't favour the idea as she is naturally scared of loans. She was born and grew up as a subsistence farmer. She never went to school and this implied that the whole idea of a loan was farfetched to her. It was not easy to convince her. It took Mr Kumwenda again to talk to my mum in order to make her appreciate the importance of education. To her there was no reason to have a visually impaired child educated as there seemingly are no jobs for them in the country. The best a blind child can do is to beg for alms. It is a common thing in my country to see blind children being used by their families as a source of income. They are forced to beg in order to support the family. Fortunately for me my mum got converted and accessed the loan. As I am writing, I am in the second year of my secondary school.

Conclusion

Problems are still there though. It is not easy for my mum to repay the loan. As a result she is forced to brew and sell opaque beer called kachasu in our local language. But this beer is illicit in my country as it is improperly distilled. Since she started this business,

our house has been turned into a public drinking place. People who come for a drink indulge in all sorts of immoral behaviour. My sisters too have become so vulnerable. More often than not drunkards have attempted to rape them. But the sad thing is that my mum has no choice but to continue with this business in order for her to support me in particular and the whole family in general. Despite the business my mum is currently doing, our family income is still very low. Besides, our home has been robbed of its peace and respect. My mum is often a victim of ridicule among our neighbours. I feel so bad but my mum and I have no choice as the drama of my life continues.



Arizona New Mexico

Texas

MEXICO

Gulf of Mexico

mexico City

Pacific Ocean



Belize

Guatemala



José Alfredo Treviño Castillo

Age: 15

Around two and a half years ago I went through the most difficult period in my life due to histiocytosis. The story began one night when I had a headache and began to vomit. Then the convulsions began and I started to see things as if they were distorted.

I was in intensive therapy for a week but the results weren't good, so my parents decided to take me to a hospital in Monterrey, where I had to be given strong medication to fight the pain.

I had to take the medicine day and night because it was the only way to make the pain disappear. As there was no reaction I was sent for radiotherapy; orderlies came for me every day, but I didn't like to be moved to go to another hospital. After a few weeks I couldn't see, but I was told my sight would return. The days, weeks and months went by, however, and nothing happened. I remember those days were full of sadness, fear, annoyance and anger. I couldn't accept the fact that I had lost my sight.

The minutes and hours felt like eternity...I was just lying on a bed without being able to do anything, although I always had support from my parents, my sister and the rest of my family. It was as if I wasn't listening; the only thought in my mind was: "Why did this happen to me?"

A few weeks went by until one day, tired of doing nothing, I screamed at my parents: "Come on, help me get up and walk!" They came quickly and, with a smile on their faces, tried to sit me up. After a few attempts I got tired and lost my temper. I started shouting and crying and my parents cried with me. I told them to leave me alone and they respected my pain and left.

Negative thoughts took over again. I couldn't understand that I was unable to stand up because of the strong medicine I had been given. The same day, just a little later, I decided to stop crying; I don't know where I got the strength from, but I managed to sit up by myself. I called on my parents again and they ran in. They were frightened, but when they saw me sitting up they were really happy, as if I had done something special. After that things got a little clearer and I managed to walk again.

In my mind, though, I had just one concern, and I was continuously asking my Mum: "What am I going to do if I can't see?", "What is my life going to be like now?", "Can I go on at school?" This was what affected me the most, but she kept telling me to relax and calm down and that they were looking for help for me. Support came in the shape of a Multiple Assistance Centre (MAC), where there were children and teenagers with different disabilities. I didn't last long there —about three days— because I felt very uncomfortable. I started to learn braille and they gave me psychological support, but I wasn't happy because I wanted to go to a normal school, so we were back to square one.

Then one day my Aunt Lety called and gave us some information about an association. My parents noted down the address and

decided to go to visit it. They were told the association only worked with children, but they would look at the possibility of providing us with services. We were happy to hear I had been accepted because the children were going to be there until they reached adolescence and they needed to be ready to assist them.

Once I had been admitted a doctor was sent to assess me. Her job was to decide which areas I should begin working on.

When my first day at the association finally arrived I was very nervous on the way, but as soon as I got there I discovered a friendly atmosphere. Everyone said hello and you could hear laughing, and this made me feel relaxed and at home. The head of the association met us and told us how things worked. She told me I was going to study orientation and mobility, braille, visual training and psychology. After a few months' classes I was given the news that I could go to a secondary school to finish my studies.

On the first day of secondary school I thought everything was going to me more difficult and nothing would be like before, but when I went into the classroom I received a warm welcome and immediate support from my teacher. At first I was afraid to speak to my classmates, but through time and contact with them I gained confidence and, little by little, I began to make friends. A few months went by like this until one day I felt depressed again because "I felt different from everyone else because I had lost my sight". It was tough for me and I stopped going to school. I shut myself off for days on end, locking myself in my room and just crying. My parents, and everyone else around me, were worried by this.

My marks went down and I was almost expelled because of my bad behaviour. I had to be taken back to the psychologist for help, but even with this support I couldn't see reason. Given the situation, my parents decided to remove my bedroom door because they were afraid I would do something foolish. However, I didn't realise the suffering and anguish I was causing those who loved me because I could only think about my own pain.

After about three weeks I was made to go back to school because my support teacher was very disappointed by my behaviour and she told my parents that if I didn't attend I would fail the course. I went back but just listened to the teacher's sermons. I remember she told me: "Imagine a line. All of us who are here to help you are on one side and you are alone on the other side. If you don't want to make the most of our support you'll remain closed off and alone, feeling sorry for yourself." This was a wake-up call for me and made me react. I was annoyed and felt deeply offended. Then I thought: "I'm going to make this teacher eat her words —she'll see what I am capable of."

So, after this conversation I started class again and I soon began to get some of the best marks. I felt happy because my support teacher was proud of me.

Thanks to all the support from my teachers, both at school and at the association, from my parents and especially from my special education teacher, I won an academic award called 'Student Merit Award 2007', given annually by the Coahuila state government to outstanding students. Everyone was delighted by this.

I think from that time on there has been a lot of progress and very few setbacks. I am learning more about my disability and to comprehend it, and one of the things I have achieved is that I feel more self-assured. This enables me to take part in different activities.

On one occasion the head of the association asked me to give a speech on global warming at an event. I accepted the invitation although I was very nervous. I had never spoken in public before, but I prepared myself very well for the presentation.

When it was my turn to speak I felt nervous, but as the minutes went by I began to calm down and everything went well. I was moved when I heard the people applaud and when they came up to congratulate me, and I felt proud.

Another achievement is that I am slowly learning to play the keyboard. At the beginning I thought it was impossible for a blind person to do that, and although I knew other people had managed it never occurred to me for one moment that I could.

Music helps me forget my problems and I enjoy it. I find it very enjoyable and plan to continue improving and learning a lot more.

I would like to highlight the support I have been given by my family; they have always been there to help me. When I feel down they know how to cheer me up and we begin the struggle again together. The truth is I can't find words to express all the love and gratitude I feel for my parents and sister.

I've got plans to do a lot of things in the future, and one of them is to go on studying. When I graduate from high school I'll study

pre-university courses, redoubling my efforts to be a good student and a better person.

Another goal I have is to become an eminent psychologist, as this will help me to get to know myself a lot better and I can use my knowledge and skills to heal other people's souls.

My main aim, however, is to become fully independent and well educated, hold down a decent job and enjoy every moment of life.

Saraí Landa Campos

Age: 15

I was born in the state of Veracruz in Mexico. When I was two and a half years old I was diagnosed with bilateral retinoblastoma (cancer of the retina); this changed my whole life but also strengthened my will to live. At the beginning things weren't easy, because I had to visit doctors and hospitals all the time and have treatment for my illness. I had operations and chemotherapy and radiation therapy that made me feel so weak that at times I felt I couldn't go on. I can tell you that one of the consequences of the treatment was that my hair fell out; I didn't like that and I used to wear a headscarf to make me feel I had hair. That's why I don't like headscarves, caps or hats now.

When it was time to go to school I went to the "Alejandro Meza" school for the blind and partially sighted, where I attended pre-school courses and one year of primary education. I learnt to read and write in braille and also normal letters. This is where, for the first time, I spent time with blind people and where my mum was taught how to educate me to be independent.

I joined a mainstream school in second year and met my first friends. I had a good and friendly relationship with them as my classmates and my teachers treated me just like any other pupil.

For family reasons I changed school. The switch was difficult because I found it hard to relate with my new classmates and teachers. There were also more things to study and I was also going through changes in my character. Unfortunately, this period of my life was sad because I lost all my friends for various reasons.

When I started secondary education I faced new challenges. I lost control of the situation and often felt confused and didn't know who I was or where I wanted to go. I started to get interested in boys the same age as me. I have to admit I am a little vain, although I have been unlucky and I only have female friends. My mum tells me that when she was my age she had a lot of male friends, so she wasn't worried about not having a boyfriend.

I am now studying pre-university education. It was difficult to adapt to at the beginning because I didn't know anyone and the teachers and course material is a lot more demanding than in any of my previous studies. I have to tell you that my family situation is difficult right now and it coincides with one of the toughest periods I have experienced. I am still not in control of the situation and maybe that's why sometimes I say and do things that I regret later. I have to struggle against my character, which stops me from apologising to people I have hurt unintentionally, and I admit that if I had three wishes I would like to change my personality to stop hurting the people I love. The other wishes would involve my family's health and wellbeing for the whole world

I think I have experienced a little bit of everything in my adolescence; I've suffered, I've laughed, I've felt confused, but

I've also had the backing of the only person capable of making me move forward, who has been by my side and supported me unconditionally for ten years and is for me, as I am for her, the only *raison d'être*, and that's why I admire her and I grant her the title of "The best mum in the world". I should also tell you I have had great support from the rest of my family and I would like you to know everyone was very kind to me at my party to celebrate my fifteenth birthday.

Everybody was involved in organising the party and it was really moving, so I am very grateful to them all because it was one of the happiest days of my life. The party made me realise that if I set myself goals I can achieve them, because I overcame one of my fears and satisfied the curiosity I had to dance well with a lot of people who all had their own way of dancing. As a young person I like music, the cinema, television programmes and especially fashion and accessories. I like to wear co-ordinated outfits and above all look very feminine. Sometimes I think this is because of my disability, because I really care about what people say about me.

One of my dreams is to do something to become more well-known. I know this can't happen overnight and I'll start doing what I enjoy; getting to know people to talk to, learn from and find out their opinions. I hope the little experience I have can help everyone I mix with, because people like me need others to get to know us and realise we are just like any other people —we have feelings, we get angry and, like everyone else, we have dreams and we want to see them through.

Personally, I have a lot of dreams. While I am writing this and expressing my feelings, it only remains for me to thank you for reading this. I wrote it with feeling and emotion, to let you get to know me a little and in the hope that my life experiences will be useful for you.



Angola

Zambia

Zimbabwe

NAMIBIA

Windhoek

Luderitz

Botswana

South Africa

South
Atlantic
Ocean



Tuhafeni Eliakim

Age: 18

I was born at Engela Hospital in the north of Namibia. My mother died when I was only one day old. I was born blind and my grandmother —that's my mother's mother— raised me after my mother's death.

My father rejected me when he heard that I was blind and he said that I was not his son. He told my grandmother that in his family they do not have blind people. So, my grandmother should see what to do. Fortunately, she accepted my situation as a child with disabilities and she raised me until I grew up.

As a child I enjoyed the childhood life with my brothers and sisters as well as with the neighbours. My brothers and sisters were always holding my arm wherever we were going because my grandmother told them that I couldn't see, so they had to do so. I was not allowed to go far from the house because my grandmother was afraid that if I went too far I might hurt myself.

One day I got sick and my grandmother took me to Engela Hospital. At that time I was already nine years old and I had not yet started schooling. At the hospital we found a social worker who was a lady. The social worker asked my grandmother about what happened to me so that I became blind and she also asked

her if I was attending school. My grandmother told the lady about what happened when I was born and also about how my father rejected me when he said that I was not his child. The social worker advised my grandmother to take me to the school for the blind in Windhoek and she also encouraged her to keep on taking care of me. She completed the form from the doctor which had to be attached to my admission form.

When I was eleven years old my grandmother took me to Windhoek to the school for the blind to start schooling. At this school I met many friends, but my first day was a problem to me because I did not know my fellow learners yet. As the days went on, I began communicating with my fellow learners and soon I had a lot of friends. Some were my peers and some were older than me.

My grandmother left me in Windhoek and she went back to the north. There, in Windhoek, was my aunt, a sister to my mother. She works as a nurse in one of the hospitals. This aunt of mine was told by my grandmother to take care of me, especially when it is an outweekend all the children have to go home because the government does not provide food for an outweekend.

However, this aunt of mine hated me so much because of me being blind. I just went to her house for two weekends; then, the third weekend, she started complaining that I was a burden to her and I was finishing her food. She also told me that next time whenever there is an outweekend, I must not come to her house anymore; I should just stay in the hostel.

This time, when she took me back to the hostel, she did not buy me any glossaries or toiletries. She told me that she didn't have money. So, I didn't have bathing soaps, cream or lotion; no sugar, no bread and no single cent to buy something for myself.

Most of the weekends I struggled and the teachers and also the school principal tried to convince my aunt, but she refused.

One outweekend I decided to go to her house by myself although she told me that I shouldn't go. On my way, while I was trying to cross the busy road, one man riding a bicycle was also trying to cross the road. The man did not see that I couldn't see. He came straight into me and he bumped me with his bicycle. I cannot remember what happened exactly to my surprise. I just found myself in the hospital.

From this bump, I sustained injuries on my right leg and up to now I cannot walk straight. I injured my face and my chest also, and this caused me to stay in the hospital for three weeks. While in hospital, the nurses phoned our school principal, and the principal went to fetch my aunt so they could come together to see me. When my aunt heard that I was bumped by the bicycle because I was trying to go to her house, she started shouting at me and she said that I am blind and I am naughty, so I deserved it. The principal was so kind to me and she told my aunt not to be so negative and shout at me because this could contribute to prolonging my illness.

While in hospital, my friends came to visit me. When I went back to school, my friends were very happy to see me healthy again.

The principal and the teachers told me that whenever there is an outweekend, I shouldn't go out; I must just stay in the hostel.

When the holiday came, I went back to the north to my grandmother. I told her about all the things that happened to me while in Windhoek and she was very sad about it. She then told me that next year I will not go to Windhoek again. She had decided to take me to another special school for the blind and deaf.

This school was in the north. By this time, I was going to start Grade 3. There, at Eluwa Special School, I enjoyed staying there because it was nearby my home village. I used to go home on my own.

Unfortunately, this school was not well advanced. We did not have proper equipment for braille and the pupils could not speak English as an official language. In Windhoek English was my medium of instructions, plus Afrikans as a second language. In the North, we were just communicating in our vernacular language which is Oshiwambo.

I just stayed for a year and I decided that I wanted to go back to Windhoek. When the holiday came, I went home to my grandmother and I told her that I wanted to go back to Windhoek. At first she refused, but later on she agreed. She told me that if I had to go to Windhoek, she did not want me to go and suffer again. She told me that she would talk to one of my uncles who was staying in Windhoek to take care of me during the outweekends.

She got in touch with one of them and he agreed. I came back to Windhoek and I had to start again in Grade 4 because my English was not good anymore after I came back from the north. My English was gone because of speaking only the mother tongue.

I met with my old friends and I have made many new ones. During home weekends, I always go to my uncle's house and he is so kind to me. He provides me with all my needs. At the moment, I am doing Grade 5 and everything is going well.

In short, this is my life as a visually impaired person.

My word of encouragement to my fellow visually impaired persons is that we should always try to be positive. Although sometimes we feel that our families are not treating us fairly, we must not get angry about it. We must be happy that we are alive. We must also thank God for his love and care.

We can do everything that sighted people can do. Let us try to work hard in school, so that we will pass to get a job.

North
Sea



Amsterdam

NETHERLANDS

Germany

Belgium



Eline Ampt

Age: 15

I've held an interview with myself. Here are the highlights of the interview:

Question by Eline: So, who are you?

Answer by Eline: I'm Eline, 15 years old and from Holland.

Question by Eline: Do you go to a normal school?

Answer by Eline: Yes, my sight is good enough for that. I have my schoolbooks/tests enlarged because of the cataracts. That makes it easier for me to read. I also wear a hat all day, cause that way I don't get so much light in my eye.

Question by Eline: Do you get help from organisations?

Answer by Eline: Well, for me it's difficult, 'cause most organisations are more specified in blind kids or really partially sighted kids. My eyesight is a bit better than that, so I usually don't fit the profile, which is annoying because while my eyesight might be 'not bad enough', I do face problems in daily life because of it and have to face them alone with my family because it's so difficult to get help.

Question by Eline: So, I heard you've contact with some other teens with eye trouble?

Answer by Eline: Yeah. In July I went to the SIP [*Stickler Involved People*] conference in the USA. There I met a lot of other teens with Stickler Syndrome and some of them also have eye problems. They're all American. I also exchange emails with some Dutch teens who I met through the glaucoma organisation and the internet.

Question by Eline: And do you like talking with them?

Answer by Eline: I don't like it, I love it! It's amazing to talk with them, 'cause they all have something in common with you that most people don't have. They really understand you, because they've been through the same or at least something similar. You know, when a 'normal' person says, 'I understand' or 'I know what you mean' they might think they understand, and they even might understand the theory, but they don't really understand like you do, cause they haven't been through it themselves. But when someone who has the same or similar problems says, 'I understand' or 'I know what you mean', you just know they really do because they really know how it feels or at least part of it.

Question by Eline: So what do your classmates/friends think of your eye problems?

Well, they all know there's something up with my eyes, 'cause I had to explain to them about the hat. Normally you're not allowed to wear a hat at school. I think most of them find it a bit weird,

'cause they have no idea or experience with this kind of stuff. They don't know how to deal with it and are probably unsure how they should react. So they just accept it. My friends know that it's part of who I am and like me for who I am, so it isn't a thing that really disables me to have friends. But even with my friends I notice they're sometimes uncomfortable talking about it, 'cause for them it's of course an unusual thing as well.

Lucas de Jong

Age: 14

Lucas de Jong is a 14-year-old blind boy who lives in Nijmegen in the Netherlands. We had an interview with him about his daily life.

What sort of school are you attending?

I'm at a normal school, a grammar school. If everything goes to plan, I will pass my final exam in three years. I have high marks.

Is it hard for you to function well at school?

Sometimes it is. When there is a lot of noise and many things are happening, I lose track of the situation. It's also hard to get in touch with somebody else, because it's often very busy and I don't know if I can start a conversation with somebody. Often I don't even know who is near to me. Because of that I find it hard to make friends. I got to know my best friend because we are both writing for the school newspaper.

Are there special things that you do to get in touch with people of your age?

Yes. I'm member of a group of partially sighted and blind children between 12 and 16 years old. Once a month we come together and have fun or do something special (e.g. wall climbing). In

such a situation, with 10 people like me, I don't find it difficult to make contact.

Do you have hobbies?

Yes. I like practicing sports, playing games such as cards or playing computer games.

Which sports do you practice?

I play goalball, a team sport for blind and partially sighted people. Unfortunately, I have to play with and against adults, because there are not enough youngsters who play goalball.

Do you have a guide dog?

No, but I'm waiting for one. I hope I get one in 2009. I'm looking very much forward to it.

As you have read, blind people have some difficulties in their daily life, but there are also many things they can do. Lucas says: "I hope that you understand more about how the daily life is for a blind person because of this interview."



Shari Whittaker Tyro

Age: 14

I want you to close your eyes. Imagine if this was all you could see. This is what it is like for blind people. Every day, seeing nothing, only darkness and mysterious shapes that you can't distinguish very well. I could have been like this, but I was lucky.

When I was born my pupils were white. I had congenital cataracts. I still really don't understand the full meaning of this, but cataracts are when the lens becomes cloudy. At a very young age I had to have my lenses removed. Since then I have had ten more operations. During one of them, the retina detached leaving me with no vision in my left eye, but in my right I have 2/60 vision, which means that I see at two metres what someone with normal vision can see at sixty metres. That makes me legally blind in New Zealand.

Having low vision and going through school is very hard. I have been able to cope with it with help from others and a positive attitude to not let my low vision hold me back from what I want to do in life.

I cannot see the whiteboard in class, so I use a laptop computer and a MagniLink student camera. These help me see things in the distance and near to me, which gives me independence.

I have teacher aides who come into class and help me if I need it. It can be strange and sometimes annoying with adults around all the time, but I don't mind really because it's their job and they are really helpful.

I am a dual user, which means I do braille and use large print as well. At the moment, I am studying ancient history completely in braille with Jenny, my Resource Teacher Vision. I've traveled round the country going to camps to study braille with other blind students. I have now been learning braille for nine years.

I love sport, and the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind (or RNZFB) and Blind Sport NZ hold many sporting events around New Zealand and the world. I have been to a few South Island games and have won some medals. I have also been to international sporting events where I have competed in swimming and track and field events.

I won three gold and three silver medals there and I was the captain of the junior goalball team which came in second, following Western Australia. In 2012 I have the opportunity to travel to the Paralympics and represent New Zealand, but only if I train hard and get selected. Next year I am going to Melbourne in Australia to take part in the Southern Cross Games.

With the great opportunities I have had in my life and all the great things I have done, there is one thing that remains impossible for me to do. I will never be able to drive. I suppose I could just get a chauffeur instead, or a guide dog!

There have been many amazing people in my life who have helped me. Firstly, my mum has helped me with my needs. She takes me to hospital when I'm unwell and she buys all the medication I need. Julz is my educational psychologist who has helped me with my phobia of dogs. Angeline is my orientation and mobility instructor, who teaches me routes around school, in public and on the bus, which will make me independent when traveling alone in public.

I have amazing friends who are really helpful and treat me like any other person. Some of my best friends are Alana, Jessica, Renee, Ashlee, Kimberley, Alex, Hannah and Emma. Like any other teenager, I do the same things. We go shopping at the mall (which I love), go to the movies, play sports and just hang around at home.

I guess I am pretty lucky with all the great things I've done and all the great adventures ahead. All the amazing people who have believed in me and supported me.

When you really think about it, being blind has its positive and negative sides. Even if you lose your sight, you can still communicate with the world and do everything you want to do. I love my life!

Niger

Chad

Benin

NIGERIA

Lagos

Cameroon

South
Atlantic
Ocean



Israel Oluwo

Age: 14

The story of my life narrated below will reveal that as a teenager I have experienced that light can become darkness, white can become black, brightness can turn to dullness and all hopes for a rewarding future can become dashed in the twinkle of an eye.

My name is Israel Oluwo, born on March 18th 1993 at Owode Yewa, Ogun State, in Nigeria. My father's name is Mr. Oluwasina Oluwo and my mother is Mrs. Iyabo Oluwo. I am black in complexion and about 4ft. 10 inches tall. I was born as a normal child with all my five senses intact. I started my primary education in Alagbon Primary School Owode Yewa and read up to primary four. During this period I was relatively brilliant since I was always among the first three top students in my class. The teacher would usually call me out for praise while some of my other classmates would be jealous.

The devil struck one afternoon when I was in primary four. I had a simple fever which forced me to go home after taking permission from my teacher. This fever eventually turned to a deadly disease called measles. The illness was so severe that by the time it was cured it had done irreparable havoc on my eyes. Rashes had entered into my eyes and before long I had become totally blind. This condition depressed me so much that I could not go back to my school to join my mates. Hence my introductory paragraph.

It was during this period of moodiness mingled with sadness that a cousin of mine brought one okada rider home to introduce my parents to Ade Okubanjo Model School for the Blind, a primary section of an educational resource centre in Ijebu Igbo. He told them that the school was free boarding with many amenities for visually impaired teenagers. He concluded that many students who finished from that school are now university graduates.

Thus I was brought to the school after necessary enquiries and registration last year to start in primary four. Since I lost my sight, life has never been the same again. I lost all my friends and playmates because they now see me as a burden to them. Now I have to be assisted in my mobility unlike in my former school at Owode where I was moving, jumping, running and playing unaided. In Owode I used to read with my eyes, but here I read with my hands on braille, even I have to be directed. Before I was blind I could identify colours, watch TV programmes, tell the time with my eyes and choose any clothes and food I like. But now the difference is clear, I could not do any of these things without any assistance. On all occasions sleeping and walking is the same to me. I always feel confined in a room unless people talk to me.

My former public school at Owode is very big with thirty-six teachers and many children who are day students. However my present school, because of its specialized nature, has better and more facilities with all students as boarders, free feeding, free tuition, free books and provision of readers for examination. There are 13 teaching staff and 17 auxiliary staff. My favourite food is

beans and my favourite subjects are bible knowledge, English and social studies.

I cannot but thank my mentor, Dr. Chief S. Ade Okubanjo, the founder of my present school. Since many products of the school are now in gainful employment, it has now eroded the idea that being visually handicapped is tantamount to street begging.



Germany

Czech
Republic

POLAND

Warsaw

Slovakia

Belarus

Ukraine

Lithuania
Russia

Karol Irla

Age: 14

As long as I can remember I have been wearing glasses. Every eye doctor who has examined my eyesight has wondered how it was possible that I had learned to walk. When I first went to kindergarten children didn't take notice that I was wearing glasses. Only at school I started to notice my defect gradually. There were some people who tried to put it out to me. It was painful but I learned how to face this problem and look proudly at them. The time of my education in classes 1-4 in primary school I look back on very warmly. People who were around me were reliable. I think that is one of the reasons why I had no problems with making friends and not many quarrels or rows with my friends at the same age.

During visits to the medical centre KORVITA in Pozna, many experts and doctors tried to help me obtain the best sharpness of my eyesight and field-of-vision. In this centre I had a very important operation, I had collagen engrafted. Unfortunately such moments go by and one has to go back to reality.

Some personal problems were the reason for me changing school. From my ordinary school I went to *Zofia Galewska Centre for Visually Impaired Children* in Warsaw. There are specially qualified teachers there. For children like me this school is like heaven, where

everything is adapted to the needs of young visually impaired people. Staying at the centre I could think a little bit more.

Very often doctors were saying that there was no hope for my eyesight and that as I got older I would lose my eyesight totally. I was thinking then that everything didn't make any sense. Why should I see and be happy about recent situations, but I'll be blind anyway. Such moments were very difficult for me, but I managed to go through it and pull myself together. Many warm-hearted people have helped me in these difficult moments, not only people my own age but also teachers, parents and friends.

Thank to this support I've driven bad thoughts away and I said goodbye to the dark world for ever. I wanted so much to see the sun which so pleasantly warms my face. At that time I thought about Wonders of this World. Even learning, which is sometimes so weary and boring, has its own aim. I thought that everything which I can see now I will also remember forever, it won't go away from me. I have 50 percent chance that I won't lose my eyesight and I hope that my chances will increase. I know that this problem is only mine but I know that people who are around me won't go away; they will stand by me and help me. I stopped thinking about sad things; I came to daylight and back to reality. I graduated from primary school and I started my gymnasium.

The teachers wanted more from pupils, so I started to work harder. After some time my bad thoughts started to come back with their new power. I escaped to my dark world crying and moaning about my lot. This time I was suffering alone and I decided to fight these

thoughts on my own, without asking anybody for help. I thought that many people wanted to help me, but I had to set my own face against this situation. I didn't give up, the fight was long and difficult, but I won...

This feeling, for the next time I saw the daylight with new power and I was convinced that life has meaning. I started to think in a positive way and I believed that anybody who doesn't give up will beat bad power like I did. The end of the school year was closer and closer and all pupils had to write many tests and exams, I had no time to think about my problems. I finished first year at the gymnasium with very good marks and I could eventually relax. I had my summer holidays planned, I couldn't be bored.

At the end of August I started to ask myself again: what if the doctors lie? What if I lose my eyesight? My doubts came back; their power was stronger than ever. Many times I was telling myself that everything would be all right, that there was a big chance for me. But at the same time something was telling me that I would lose my eyesight. Such thoughts were taking my wish to do anything away.

"For the third time I'm badgered with such ideas and I don't have the strength to do anything. Is it a sign for me?", I was asking myself. After some time my bad thoughts won and I started to believe in my dark ideas. I didn't ask for help, I thought I would manage to overcome it on my own. Even my return to school didn't help.

Suddenly, on some autumn day, I felt that there was no more sorrow in my heart. The darkness gave in and seemed not to come

back again. For sure? Today I think about those circumstances in other ways. Every morning I go out to school and I don't recall those bad things because I think it doesn't make any sense. I fight them as I did the first time. Successfully or not? —we will see in some time.

Very often I'm offended because I have problems with my eyesight and I wear glasses. Perhaps due to these attacks I fight with myself. Anyway, I'm aware of the fact that there are many intolerant people in this world, people who aren't able to understand other people's problems. Sometimes people can think that an eyesight defect is a conscious choice of a person who has got it. If it depended on people, who and how would they like to be, there would be nothing on this world. Some would choose laziness, some fortune, but who would choose work? That's how it is. But anyway I think that I can treat my eyesight defect as a kind of trump. IQ research in Poland shows that people with any eyesight defect are more intelligent than any other people.

I attend a school in which I really know that I'm alive! The fantastic atmosphere doesn't let me feel that I'm worse. The teachers make the work easier for those who don't see well, they consider their problems. I'm glad that I'm here because here I can feel fully a human being. From here I have a very good start into my future and further life. I think I won't change school.

Talking about my future...If nothing changes, I will be an information scientist or graduate from construction studies and become an engineer. Further plans are unknown because so many

things change nowadays. We, the partially sighted or blind have many opportunities to choose. We can become masseurs, teachers, information scientists, lecturers... There are many ways, you have to use them —this is an art. Things that we get from our destiny are not always easy to explain.

When people live here and now, not worrying about the future can achieve much. Now I don't think much about my future lot. It won't help me. I'm just wondering what it would be like without my eyesight condition. This question is very often with me, although I can't answer it. Would my life be different if I had perfect eyesight? If the only glasses I had to wear were sunglasses? If...

These and many questions like that you can answer only on your own, without help. This is my life as the life of a partially sighted teenager. If it's interesting or boring, thrilling or dull, you—readers or listeners—are the only people who can give any answer to these questions. I described my life not so exactly; I rather concentrated on the emotions that made me write. So, it's the end, the end of this essay, not of my life of course because I hope there will be many interesting events, which I will describe.

Zuzanna Osuchowska

Age: 13

I am a little shy. I am in 6th grade of an elementary school and music school at the Institute for the Blind at Laski near Warsaw, Poland. I also take voice lessons in Zyrardow, where I live. Every day I commute to school, which is pretty far, about 60 km one-way. Almost all day I spend at the Institute. When I finally come home from school, late in the evening, it is the only time when I have a chance to do my homework. But I don't let it bother me, and I do not worry, at least I have no time to be bored and every moment of my free time I spend very actively doing interesting things.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I am very interested in music. It is my true passion. Since the beginning of this school year I have changed slightly. Currently I devote more time to music and pay much more attention to musical studies. I love to learn all kinds of new things at my music school, for instance different musical terms and ideas.

Besides music, math is my favorite subject at school. It can be truly fascinating, and absorbs my full attention. I am always interested in learning much more, and go further beyond what the program has to offer, like solving all kinds of math problems. I also like watching

volleyball games on TV when our Polish team is playing. Certainly, I can only do it together with my sister Ania, who always tells me what is happening, and I always cheer for our national team.

How do you spend your free time? Certainly, there must not be much time left, since most of it you spend on studying.

For sure, I do not have much free time for myself but I am glad with what I have, and I don't even remember when I had more of it. Usually on Saturdays I go to a concert or a music festival. This is the place where I meet my friends and we talk and sing together.

When I am in Zyrardow I like to listen to music. Apart from music I absolutely adore walking, which I have discovered quite recently. When I am at home I keep contact with my friends through the telephone or the internet.

As far as the music concerts are concerned, there is a favorite place where I regularly visit, which is the Regional Museum of Metallurgy in Pruszkow, near Zyrardow. After attending six concerts in a row, a woman in the ticket office told me that since I have been coming there so often she offered me free concert tickets and promised that she would mail them directly to me. I was thrilled with that offer because that is the place where one can not only listen to music but also attend a lecture on literature.

Does your inability to see cause you any problems?

Undoubtedly, there are problems. For instance, during school breaks such as winter holidays, apart from my sister there is no

one else I can be with to keep me company. At my school, boys and girls come from all over Poland and during such times they stay at their homes far away from me, so it is not possible to visit each other. In general it is very difficult for me to find common interest with children who have sight because sometimes I am a little timid. Besides, they probably believe that a blind person thinks differently than they do, does not know anything and is totally different from them.

There is another problem...

For example, I cannot help my mother run errands, because in our town there is only one main intersection that has a traffic light with sound. This is really a big problem because obviously I will have to become independent eventually. I believe, however, that in the future the technology will be more advanced and it will eventually solve the problem.

What are you afraid of?

Most of all I am afraid of evil. Particularly violence and hatred scare me. They can be the main factor that destroys the beauty of life. One has to find a solution to the problem of hatred and violence because the more it increases the more difficult it is to stop it.

Sometimes it is difficult to stop the hatred and violence not knowing what is causing it. And this is particularly difficult because each person has a different reason to feel hatred and violence and the solution has to be unique for each of them. But the most important thing is to try and find a solution.

What brings you the most joy?

For me the greatest joy is to follow my dream to become a singer. I am passionate in learning new and more challenging repertoires. It is fortunate that I am able to take voice lessons. The fact that I can move someone with my singing also gives me great satisfaction. I am very glad that during my performances I have not only a chance to make new friends but also meet many well-known artists and singers and sometimes even sing with some of them. For example, I have sung with Grzegorz Turnala, Adam Nowak, the leader of 123 Group, Irena Santor, and Magda Umer.

Another thing that brings me joy is when someone treats me with kindness and gives me positive feedback. I think that having support from people is the most important factor which makes my life worthwhile.

What are your dreams?

My greatest desire is to grow as an artist and develop my vocal skills. With each year I acquire new experience, which builds my confidence and gives me a lot of satisfaction.

Most of all I would like to make new friends so I do not feel lonely. I think that loneliness must be some kind of emptiness (sometimes with a few nice moments in it) in which one can feel lost. It is inevitable and one cannot avoid feeling lonely and vulnerable, mainly because of the helplessness and hardship of daily life, which can be overwhelming. It can be very hard to overcome. Most of all I do not want to have enemies. I believe

that only one enemy could be enough to make my life difficult and miserable.

However, I am aware of the fact that each of us has maybe not total control, but to some degree a big impact on one's happiness. I believe that only we can make our dreams come true and therefore I try to be optimistic. I also hope that I will not be affected by other illnesses, because it is hard to live life being ill.

I am sure you must feel sad sometimes. Is there anything in particular that you do to overcome these feelings?

The best way to improve my mood is to listen to my favorite music. This can change my way of thinking and help me to become more optimistic. Sometimes one can come across a song with lyrics so beautiful that it can give encouragement and hope.

I also think that reading books is a good way to overcome sadness. At such times when we think of events or characters from a book, at least for a time we tend to forget about our own problems.

There is another great way to stay optimistic —and that is simply by talking to friends, who will try to help out by giving advice and moral support. Sometimes I need them more and at other times not as much, but for sure it can never hurt to have a friend around. All this helps me a great deal in overcoming my sadness.

How would you envision your future?

In the future I would love to become a singer. However, my dream is not necessarily to become a famous person, but to find an interesting career in life. I could see myself as a soloist or a group singer. I would like to give concerts in many different places and to sing songs written by accomplished songwriters and composers. This certainly would be my dream-come-true future.

However, I am totally aware of the fact that it is extremely difficult in Poland for a handicapped person to become an accomplished artist. A similar situation is in our theatres: many theatre directors would prefer to hire regular actors simply because it is much easier for them. One can only imagine how much more challenging it is to teach a blind person all the necessary movements and gestures. Therefore, I am not so sure that my dream will come true. Anyway, I haven't yet decided what else I would like to do, if I am not able to become a singer.

What would you like to tell your sighted peers?

I would like to help them to understand that although I am a blind person, nevertheless, my hands and my legs are healthy. Moreover, the majority of the blind in the world have no intellectual disabilities. It is possible to communicate with them just the same, as they are able to communicate among themselves, and maybe even they can become friends with a blind person.

Everybody has some weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and in the case of the blind, it is their sight that makes them vulnerable. However,

they are able to hear much better than others. Then why not try to make it work? Believe me, it doesn't feel good to hear when people whisper about us in our presence. In any case, it is not pleasant to be unnoticed and ignored. Sighted people should try to imagine what it is like not to be able to see, maybe then it would be easier for them to understand my situation.





Arctic
Ocean



Alina Shevtsova Lipetsk

Age: 15

Dear Grown-ups,

Do you remember how many lessons a student has during his studies? I know it's about 10 000 lessons, but also he must learn 10 000 home tasks.

That's why, to my mind, it's very important to pay attention to the conditions that each child has at school and at home, so as not to do harm to his physical and mental health.

I think you will agree that every family where everyone is responsible for its comfort, success in work, health and good spirits must be a strong unit. We ought not to forget that we are members of society and family is the most important thing for each of us. The children whose parents take proper care of them are very grateful to them either now or afterwards when they become grown-ups.

As for my family everything is all right. We are happy and love each other. But I can't say the same about all my schoolmates.

There are 320 students at our school, among them there are orphans. So I should tell you how proud we are to be students of our school. It's special because of its climate. It is very friendly

and warm. That's why we call our school 'our warm home'. Our motto is 'treat others as you want them to treat you'. We are surrounded by skilled, creative teachers, tutors, and medical staff. No one could have better grown-ups than they have been to us. They have always been so caring, considerate, understanding and dependable. They always seem to be concerned about our life and take time to listen to our health problems, studies and activities. We love them very much. They teach us to live not just to survive! That's why each student at our school is independent and thoughtful. We know that our school is a safe place for us; we have times of quiet listening and movement and interaction. We are a family! In order to have a loving family each person must do his part. We are friends and all decisions we make together.

I must say that life in our school is very interesting. Our principal, teachers and tutors know our interests and hobbies, so they help and teach us how to be good at our studies and how to arrange parties, different competitions and events. We have self-government. The more active students head some children's organizations such as the pioneer organization, which organizes a lot of interesting things at school. There are also many clubs in our warm home for every taste: sports, art, clay-toy, straw-toy, music and subject clubs. Each student can find a matter according to his or her interests, wishes and ability.

Our students can play different musical instruments, can dance and sing folk or hit songs. We can paint, make different toys. We can also swim and do massages, we can... what can't we

do? Each student at our school takes part in different events and competitions up to 10 times a year on regional, Russian and international levels. You think I'm a boaster? No! Everything is true! We won top places and have a lot of certificates, diplomas, medals, prizes and even grand-prizes. We compete not only with disabled students but also with healthy ones. And then we forget about our disabilities and health problems. Words cannot convey the joy and pride I have always felt for my school and our students. Our school is known all over Russia and in some foreign countries: France, England and Italy.

And now I have a lucky chance to tell you about our school theatre "Payats". In 2006 it became the laureate of all-Russia competition and it is included in a list of special theatres in Russia. I am proud to be one of the actresses of this theatre. It was founded in 2003, and since that time we have performed some plays by Russian and foreign authors and had great success. All performances are based on our feelings and emotions.

We do not play: we do everything in such a way as we feel it. The theatre helps me to be independent and confident in myself. It teaches me to be organized, responsible and brave. Moreover it helps me better to feel and understand other people. I am sure it will also help me to make the right choice on my living way and I can find my own road and be happy, like many of my schoolmates who have became teachers of literature, math, history, foreign languages, social teachers, medical nurses, masseurs and musicians —many of them are blind, and some of them work at our school.

If you have been interested in our school you are welcome! We are always glad to see everybody and share our experience of how to be happy. Be sure, bad vision is not a hitch. If you want to be happy, be happy!

With love, partially sighted, disabled child, Alina Shevtsova.

Anastasiya Bakumchenko

Age: 15

What a pity! Oh, I've missed the bus again because I didn't see the number, and it has gone without me. Luckily I left the house one hour early. And still there is some hope to get to the rehearsal on time, avoiding unpleasant excuses when I have to confess I am partially sighted. It is my great pain and trouble throughout my whole life. I don't want anybody to know about it.

My full name is Anastasiya (meaning "returned to life" in Greek), and it is really so. But my friends call me just Nastya. I was born in Rostov-on-Don, the capital of our Southern Region. Unfortunately, I was born completely blind, and I have the chance to see the world partially only thanks to my parents' selflessness and the professionalism of Russian doctors. I had four serious operations and at the moment I would not like to recall those hard times my family and I had to go through.

Can you imagine a life when almost everyone teased me and called me names? I could certainly get used to the darkness and silence, and spend my time in a type of 'no world', not taking part in children's games, not going out at all, only sitting at home and doing nothing. But that wasn't in my character; from my early childhood I was curious and active. At the age of 4 I had already begun to study music, dance and singing. As a schoolgirl I took

a great interest in the environment (by the way, I am a member of the City Ecological Council), mathematics and English.

Environmental problems have become exceptionally acute in modern life. For decades the national economy focused on large projects, including giant projects in what was called the transformation of nature.

Our nature is greatly polluted. We need clean air to breathe and pure water to drink, and I think that all teenagers, including myself, can help our planet and make the world a better place. My friends and I often take part in various environmental activities and projects. I am sure our work will help to save and preserve the world in which we live.

I am also keen on journalism. I am a correspondent for our school newspaper, called 'Anti-routine'. This newspaper helps us, the visually impaired, to discuss our problems, to be heard and to attract people's attention; to feel self-reliant and successful.

"There is enough light for those who want to see, and enough darkness for those who don't want to". These wise words have become our newspaper's motto. We were happy to win the all-Russia School Newspapers Competition. To our great joy we were awarded and invited to the activities that were held in Moscow in honour of the winners.

In Moscow we had to represent our region and to tell the audience about our native city, the largest city in the south of Russia, and its green and beautiful streets, fine parks and squares, magnificent

buildings and the embankment. We are proud of famous people who lived in our region such as IP Pavlov, AP Chekhov, MA Sholokhov, Vera Panova, Yevgeny Vuchetich and many others.

Representing our region, we danced the "Kazachok". It was a great success with the public. I was Aksynia and my partner was Grigory (these are the main characters from Sholokhov's "Quietly flows the Don"). While we were dancing we could not see the audience; we only heard their breathing and we did it!

'Anti-routine' is our pride and joy; it helps us avoid boring school life, to be helpful, kind and attentive to each other and to people around us. We were delighted to win the competition, which included pupils without disabilities.

Society must realise that we are not different; we want to be useful and take an active part in social life, but we need to feel we are cared for.

As for me, I do my best not to feel like a disabled person. But, to tell the truth, it's not easy for me to learn at school because I read and write only with the help of a magnifying glass. I have to try hard to get excellent marks.

Today it's not easy to be a teenager. There is a lot of violence in modern life. Many teenagers have problems with drugs, alcohol, AIDS, violent actions... they should understand there is only one way out —to be involved in good activities, to play sports, to be helpful, not to be indifferent to their problems. I have no bad habits and neither do my friends, but we can't watch how teenagers

around us die or become worse and worse. Some teenagers get upset or depressed when they can't solve their problems. Our task is to help them.

If everybody saves one person or two —it would be great. You will feel you are needed in this world.

Our school life is enjoyable and not boring at all. Our school is our home. A lot of attention is paid to our health. We attend a lot of sports clubs and sections and participate in many competitions to keep fit and healthy. We also go on excursions to many places; we have visited St Petersburg, Moscow, Kislovodsk, Pyatigorsk and many towns in our region too.

I don't know my plans for the future. I'd prefer to study humanities, but I'm not sure. It's extremely difficult for partially-sighted children to get higher education; there are no special textbooks and a danger of losing your sight for ever. One more problem is to find a job after graduating. We hope our government will pay attention to us and we won't be forgotten.

However, today we live in an interesting world! We fly to other planets, discover old manuscripts, create artificial intelligence, do cloning, get to the bottom of the oceans, release tremendous energy...

I am eager to live in a world like this and find my place in it.

I hope my dreams come true.

Anna Sorokina

Age: 15

I have a lot to say to my peers, to share my plans for the future with them and to tell them about my problems. All my achievements are the result of my painstaking work, the work of my tutors, teachers, relatives and friends.

I was born in the Chuvash Republic, which is part of the Russian Federation. Our republic has always been famous for its hospitality and kindness. Chuvashia is a multinational republic and it is always ready to accept people from all over the world. Chuvashia is a great republic and I really approve of our government policies, the main aim of which is to support youth in all spheres. I'm proud to be a citizen of the Chuvash Republic!

Now let me introduce myself. My name is Ann Sorokina. I'm 15. I'm a pupil in the 10th form of the Cheboksary School of general education for children with poor eyesight. I'm an excellent pupil, I read a lot, and I'm especially fond of reading fiction books and books which help the extension of my knowledge. My favourite classes at school are: mathematics, English, information science and geography. At school I attend a computer classroom where I communicate with my peers over the internet, make up presentations and look for the information I need. In addition, I'm keen on checkers; I have achieved much success in it so far. I took

prize-winning places among my peers able to see at the municipal and republican competitions several times.

I also find time to go in for dancing; I'm a member of the choreographic ensemble "Tantash", which has been the laureate of many republican contests for five years. In the summer of 2007 our ensemble took part in the all-Russian Festival of National Ensembles held in Saint Petersburg, where we became the laureates. I'm a member of the School Governing Board, I'm engaged in social and public work and I take an active part in all school events.

But it is sport that takes most of my life. It helps me strengthen not only my body but also my character and will; it also helps me shape an active position in life. This is my teacher of physical training, the honoured trainer of the Russian Federation, Tcherhyshov Vasiliy Nickolaevich, who infused me with love for sport. I began going in for track and field regularly in the 7th form under the direction of my teacher. I train every day and it gives me a lot of pleasure. Although it may be difficult sometimes, I still believe that I will be able to cope with all these difficulties, because I'm not worse than any other teenager.

I have been taking part in different contests since 2004; now I'm only 15, but I have already won the title of champion of Russia. In 2005 I took part in the World Championships in Colorado Springs, USA, where I took first place in the Girls' Long Jump Junior B2 event and was awarded a gold medal, and I took second place in the Girls' Shot Put Junior B2 and second place in the Girls'

300 Meter Dash Junior B2 and was awarded two silver medals accordingly.

In 2005 and in December 2007 I went to Moscow to take part in the Festival of Culture and Sport, where I was awarded a special name medal (in 2005) and a jubilee medal from the Federation of Sports for children with poor eyesight (in 2007). In 2006 I performed successfully at the European Championships in Assen, Holland, where I was awarded three silver medals. In the summer of 2007 I took three first places and one second place at the 2nd World Youth Championships in the same city.

My school has all the facilities for the development of each pupil's abilities and talents. Our school has a good material and technical basis, our gymnasium and the therapeutic physical training room are equipped with sport facilities, they contain everything necessary for going in for sports. There is also a music classroom with various musical instruments in our school. The school folk ensemble, 'Rucheyek', has been performing successfully for three years already. There is also a chess-checkers hobby group in our school and seven interest societies for children of different ages.

Now I'd like to tell you a few words about my family. My family is large and friendly: my father, my mother, two brothers and I. My parents are very kind people; they always take care of me and my two brothers. My parents help me to cope with my problems. They are real friends, they always understand me and try to give me good advice, because they wish me only the best. I try to spend all my free time with my family. We go skiing to the country in

winter, in summer and in autumn we go to the opposite bank of the river Volga, we go to the village on holiday, we always try to find time to go to the theatre.

After leaving school I want to enter the Moscow State University and get a law degree, so that I can know the laws and protect the rights of handicapped children. Moreover, I want to take an active part in working out the laws which would permit all handicapped children to make their dreams come true.





Daniel Ramajo Falcón

Age: 14

When we talk about blind people we are talking about challenges. These challenges are related to the added difficulty we are all aware of, which at times doesn't allow us to do what we want to do. This is not because something can be done or not, but because other people or bodies are unwilling to facilitate the accommodations we need.

There are numerous examples of how an education where resources are lacking can influence a person's life. Many people with a visual impairment, when Spain was a poor country, had no opportunity to be properly trained. Their only education was the radio at the time and popular culture, and they are now intelligent people but with a low level of knowledge.

A visually impaired person is not aware of how much some people admire him or her. They see how difficult things are for the visually impaired person, but even then they continue to fight with all their strength. In some cases it is difficult, but why? The answer is simple:

- Because that very important exam for a student who has studied so hard was not made available in an adapted format and we had to move heaven and earth to enable the person to sit the exam properly;

- Because in the labour market there are companies that discriminate against blind people and don't let them do the job they like or the job they want to do;
- Because we have to put up with ignorant people who start to insult you if you bump into them in the street;
- Because disability conceals people and their skills. What I mean by this is that to give someone a job or a place in a school, for example, the disability takes precedence over the person's qualifications and skills. This is, in part, logical because a person with visual impairment is very different from a person with cerebral palsy, but we have to do everything we can to make sure there are fewer and fewer barriers and ensure the most important thing is not the disability but the skills.

As for rights, we enjoy the same rights as any other person who does not have a visual impairment, as well as the same duties, but which is more important? Making sure our rights are upheld and we can enjoy them, or meeting our duties?

The visually impaired individual him or herself has a key role to play as regards their own rights and education; they have to fight for justice and the same education for all. It is a little sad to see some ONCE members who don't aspire to anything in life except having everything done for them by others. They don't learn to become independent and to look after themselves as they have been defeated by a non-existent army called impossibility. I believe if a blind person thinks they are worthless, they will really suffer in the future and they actually will become worthless. Then they will

notice that their tears and absolute dependency have increased to the point where they are functionally useless as people.

There are buildings (schools, town halls, shops and so on) that are not suitably adapted for a visually impaired person, or even for a wheelchair user (in my opinion people in wheelchairs face even greater difficulties than the visually impaired). The possibility of using these premises just like every other person is a right we cannot enjoy on many occasions. What makes it worse is that sometimes we can but we don't want to. Why is that? Because of our own interests?

Although a blind person faces difficulties, he or she also has virtues because of the disability, for example good hearing or a good sense of smell. These are helpful in fields such as music or art, opening up a wide range of possibilities to blind people and helping train their hearing, their minds and other things —many distinctive feelings we should take advantage of.

There are also some people who refuse to accept their visual impairment and think they can see as well as anyone else and don't have a problem. It is one thing to have an optimistic outlook in certain things, and quite another to refuse to notice them. I just think when they realise they are not achieving everything they want because they have an additional difficulty, they will see they were wrong to say their problem was non-existent and they will realise they had some rights that they haven't made full use of.

The result will be a poor education compared to the one they should have received, and a future they won't want, and all

because they were unable to accept a self-evident reality that can be overcome if one is strong enough and has a positive mentality and sufficient will to fight.

Finally, I would like to pay a little humble tribute to those who, despite all difficulties, have created a life for themselves that's not normal but too busy. I am talking about people who have noticed the problem they face and, without a second thought, have reacted and overcome each and every obstacle that arose, finding new ways for other partially sighted people and themselves to enjoy free time and recreation, becoming leaders and taking up key positions in social and cultural organisations and political parties with a permanently positive mind-set.

I've always thought if you want to do something, whatever it is, you can do it. If you set yourself a challenge it's a question of how much you want it. In other words, if you really want something NOTHING can get in your way and stop you from doing it, whatever it may be. Thanks to today's breakthroughs in technology there's nothing that can't be done.

In sports too there is a wide range of options: goalball, futsal, athletics, swimming and so on. And it's not just sports, but countless options in arts or professions, but when I say professions it's between inverted commas because it doesn't depend on the blind person but on the person who holds the key position in the company, and it doesn't matter how much psychology is there; if they are unwilling there's no job, and this is the harsh truth that holds us back in this field to a certain extent.

After reading this piece, I would like us to realise how these three factors that influence the life of a person without a disability—rights, education and psychology—are crucial in the life of a blind person. Blind people can only be good citizens if they are aware they are the sole driving force for their own future through quality education, feeling supported by other and fully exercising in this way their rights.

Rocío Mesta Rodríguez

Age: 16

My name is Rocío and I am partially sighted. The truth is that when I was a child I never accepted my disability; in fact I didn't even know a lot about it. But in my adolescence everything is different, and that's why I decided to write about it.

I now understand why my parents used to speak to me about a 'strange' place called 'ONCE', about why I could never walk along the street by myself and why I couldn't see the blackboard in class. I gradually began to accept myself, appreciate the help I get from those around me and not let the question "What will people say?" affect my life whatsoever. I was missing a very important thing, however: friends.

I've always had problems with my classmates...they used to laugh at me, leave me on my own, tell lies about me...I don't think I'll ever understand why, but even then I decided not to throw in the towel. Sooner or later I was going to have friends.

I began to take all the corrective devices I need to class. To tell you the truth it was tough, but I never regretted it. My studies are going better now. The toughest thing for me though was beginning to use a cane in my everyday life. A lot of people have distanced themselves from me and others didn't agree I should use it. People pointed at me in the street and made remarks —some

of them not very polite—to my family. However, with time these things upset me less and less to the point where now I don't care. If I am forced to choose between my independence and people, I prefer my independence.

And, finally, after so many disappointments and lies, I met my real friends both within ONCE and from outwith the organisation. I can count on them and, more importantly, they can count on me. To sum up, I am a completely different person to the one I was before.



Maddy Kirkman

Age: 15

Lewisham, South-East London, Britain. A place I have lived all my life —but a place not regularly connected with initiatives for young people. Lewisham, a borough bordering the more affluent districts of Greenwich and Dulwich, is an area of the capital which has recently received a high level of media attention. This coverage however, has been extensively negative. If you were to search 'Lewisham' in BBC News, amongst the top ten articles found are: 'Police to hold talks with gangs', 'Youth bailed over cross-fire death' and 'Teenage bus stop murder victim mourned'.

The area also boasts the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in all of Europe, and with cannabis being the drug-of-choice for young people in the borough, the highest percentage of under-25s being treated in mental health wards in the city. But the Lewisham I know, the one I have lived, worked and studied in for over 15 years, isn't characterised by violence, drug-abuse and underperforming schools. Where I live has green spaces, youth clubs, community centres and initiatives that take teenagers seriously.

The Young Mayor for Lewisham Project has been a big part of my life since I stood as a candidate in the 2006 elections. The project, which has been running for 4 years with the support of the adult Mayor and Cabinet, holds an annual ballot in which all

young people in Lewisham can vote for someone between 11 and 18 to become the new Young Mayor. This individual then has 25,000 pounds to spend on projects outlined in their manifesto.

So far the scheme has built a skate-park, erected a graffiti wall, run an under-18 club and rock nights, held a 'young person's conference' and supported numerous youth groups and charities. The Young Mayor for Lewisham is the longest running project of its kind in the UK, but has also made international links with other like-minded initiatives in Prague and Bulgaria, with plans for a European Young People's Summit in Brussels at some point in the future.

My role in all this, having not made it through the election, is as a 'Young Advisor' and so I sit on the panel of teenagers who counsel the Young Mayor. As a member of this group, I represent two major sections of society; firstly, the young disabled people in the borough, and secondly the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender youth living in the area. This is a difficult task to maintain, as often there are several key considerations that need to be aired under one topic, but also because, a lot of the time, people don't want to know. Although this can be frustrating and upsetting on occasion, I refuse to stop raising my hand, and will continue fighting until both these parties are treated equally, and their discrimination is seen with the same disgust as racism.

One subject, however, that all those involved are united upon, is the positive portrayal of young people in the media. We constantly invite local and national reporters to any events and use our website

and MySpace to communicate with young people and the press. As I have ambitions towards journalism, I have had the privilege of writing for a local publication called 'Oil', a magazine entirely written and produced by adolescents. I have also recorded 3 pieces for BBC Radio 4, documenting the RNIB Vacation Schemes for young people, as well as investigating sports facilities available to visually impaired youngsters in London.

In terms of sports, my passion lies in Swimming and Athletics. This leads me to another very successful organisation for disabled young people. The Sharks Swimming Club takes pride in teaching and training children as young as 2 or 3 who have a physical, learning or sensory impairment, to swim. I first joined the club as an 11-year-old, when they turned my shaky frog-kick into breast-stroke.

Since then I have trained to a national standard, and the club is immensely proud of an ex-Shark who now performs at international competitions. For 2 years now I have been a part of the teaching team at the club, and once a week help participants take their first steps (or splashes) in the small pool, which is an incredibly rewarding experience.

Although I enjoy teaching, I love learning. I take my studies very seriously, and am grateful to attend one of the highest achieving schools in the area. The Special Educational Needs provision I receive is exceptional; my Learning Support Assistant is knowledgeable and fantastic at her job, and the equipment I benefit from is spot on. Despite a bumpy transition from a comfortable primary school to

the inevitable unfamiliarity of year 7, including a certain amount of stress for my parents, I can safely say that I enjoy school and can't wait to progress on to sixth-form.

School, though, has not always been easy. I was bullied, both physically and verbally, for many years. But I took the opportunity upon entering secondary school to make a difference. I seek to challenge the stereotypes of blind people. Showing other young people that those who are partially sighted can be outspoken, can fancy people, wear short skirts, and occasionally swear, along with the best of them. Sometimes, I feel obliged to make a quieter, more subtle, contribution to community, by raising the profile of visually impaired young people in my area. I'll put on my smart jeans and a fitted jacket, unfold my cane, and stride down the road —catch a bus, buy a drink, use a mobile, anything— and let them stare. And for the most part, this is met with admiration and hopefully a slightly improved awareness of the issue.

I am very lucky, I will never dispute that; I have teachers who want to learn to modify work, siblings who allowed me to rollerblade into trees, and friends who can audiodescribe a film better than any professional. I am not for one moment suggesting that Lewisham is without its problems either, or that my experience of sports and SEN provision is enjoyed by all blind or partially sighted young people, but I am aware of the injustice and imbalance evident in society, and this is why I whole-heartedly support the work of Listening to the Children.

ACTION - NOT WORDS.



Canada

USA

New York

Mexico

Pacific
Ocean



Atlantic
Ocean



Alexandria Parrish

Age: 15

Education in the United States is arranged on a nine-month calendar system that is based upon past agrarian societies; a time in our history when children were needed for labor purposes during the summer. Despite advances in technology and rapid globalization, we still use this form of arrangement in our American educational system.

For most teenagers this is a time to relax and be carefree. However, I try to utilize this gap in formal education to pursue creative opportunities allowing me to develop concepts through extraordinary learning experiences outside of the classroom. For example, as much as I have studied about volcanoes through tactile graphics, reading assignment and lectures, I never really owned the information until I climbed Mount Etna in Sicily during the summer of 2007 on a trip with the People to People Student Ambassador Program. This type of experiential learning is critical for those like me who are blind or partially sighted to gain true knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

The Ambassador Program was an exceptional learning opportunity to communicate my culture to others, and to experience different cultures through art, food, music and architecture. Ironically, while standing in the midst of history from the top of the Eiffel Tower

in Paris to the Spanish Steps in Rome, I was educating others on aspects of blindness. Independence, adaptations, confidence and grace communicates volumes to others who may cling to old myths and misconceptions regarding blindness.

I found that when advocating for myself, humor goes a long way in allowing my sighted peers to see the real me and all of my capabilities. For example, when sighted friends are making plans to see a movie they might not invite me because they may believe that since I am unable to see the screen, I would be uncomfortable. Therefore, I will often initiate the plans and even jokingly offer to drive.

In terms of formal education in the school setting, it can be difficult at times to be mainstreamed into the classroom with sighted peers. Teachers not meaning any harm do not describe things with great detail and often make judgments as to what information they will omit, assuming that there is no point of reference. For those few teachers who go above and beyond the call of duty to help me develop concrete understanding of the world, I am eternally grateful.

I am also grateful to mother, who never misses an opportunity to help me build my visual memory. For instance, once she arranged for me to walk through an unfilled swimming pool in order to gain an understanding of slope and gradient as well as negative buoyancy as in the case of submarine physics.

These creative learning opportunities in and out of the classroom will help me to compete in a global society. The unemployment rates for those who are blind and partially sighted are unacceptable, and I believe that education and advocacy are the keys to success.

Andrew Giulio

Age: 17

When I was young, I didn't really acknowledge that I had a visual impairment. At about third or fourth grade I realized that I couldn't see quite as well as my peers to read the board in the classroom. My family knew I was legally blind due to nystagmus, but they didn't treat me as if I were handicapped. I still don't get away with using it as an excuse or crutch.

Technology, including computers and large print books, has helped me to compensate for my difficulty in seeing, although some assignments take me longer to complete. The support and encouragement of my family inspires me to persist in learning and working to develop the knowledge and skills to succeed in my chosen field.

Andrew Luk

Age: 16

I am a sophomore at Diamond Bar High School. My teacher of the visually impaired is currently Theresa Bush, who in the past two years has done a great job of getting me the necessary school materials in braille, informing my other teachers of my needs, and educating me in ways to better fit in socially and personally with my peers.

As with any blind person, my future goal is to be able to live independently, and two key areas in which I need significant training are in modern technological advances and mobility. Technology has evolved to the point where if one cannot use it fluidly, he will fall behind his fellow man in many aspects of life. Without technology, daily life would be inefficient because it would require one to expend much more time and energy. I also need to learn other daily living skills such as cooking, doing laundry, accessing public services, and travelling and communicating in public.

I had a brain tumour when I was the age of four, which caused my loss of vision and partial hearing in my right ear. I also had problems walking, which put me in a wheelchair for several months. These were the disabilities that troubled me for a significant period, but thanks to great doctors I was soon able to get back on my feet, lose the immense weight I gained during my time in the hospital, and begin my first years of school.

My elementary school career started a year later than most other children, but my time at Valleydale Elementary seemed to fly by as I came across few obstacles. I could not speak English when I entered kindergarten, but I learned quickly, and by the time I was in fifth grade, I met and made friends with a lot of people and made it into the GATE program for advanced students. I then attended Foothill Middle School, where I became acquainted with a new teacher of the visually impaired, Mike Perez. He told me on the first day of sixth grade that his goal for me was to attend a four-year university one day, and that no financial, social, or physical barrier would hold me back. I took these words to heart, and though I have wavered in thought from these dreams occasionally, this remains one of the highest goals I strive for.

I wish to pursue a career in accounting or journalism because they fit my personality well and both are among my interests. I moderately enjoy mathematics and thoroughly admire the art of writing. Furthermore, accounting is an attractive field to me because it provides a solid and stable income and it would allow me a job where I could help citizens by quietly doing things I am interested in, math and the federal system, without having to travel a great deal.

In journalism, I could meet and learn about people from a broad range of backgrounds, professions, and who have been through a wide variety of life experiences. I am increasingly gaining interest in the pursuit of knowledge through investigation, and I find myself dissatisfied with the way news is reported in my country, because many reporters appear to express their strongly subjective biases

simply because they hold a position which allows them to have their voice heard. Uncovering and analysing stories, along with math and taxes, is a passion of mine, and I would like to major in and pursue at least one of these careers.

We have come a long way institutionally in making life as efficient as possible for the blind and disabled, but of course further improvement is mandatory and plausible. I have mentioned my struggles with technology, and I think it would be helpful to require that all teachers of the visually impaired learn such skills before they can be hired to the job. Here, it is somewhat a task for the blind to find computer classes because they must actively search for opportunities to take after-school or summer courses to obtain these skills. Because of this hardship, many blind students are thwarted from pursuing technological education. I have always worked hard at school, yet none of my teachers of the visually impaired have had the education to integrate blind technology into my daily school work. This has been frustrating to me, and I believe that it needs to be changed.

Finally, I suppose you would like to learn more about me and the way I view the world and approach life, so I will share with you some details about myself. I adopted from Mr. Perez the belief that it is crucial to my well-being that I learn to be well-rounded in all aspects of life. I am committed to excelling in school, while being involved in extracurricular activities. Because of this, I serve the community through Key Club International and plan to become a new member of my school's swimming team.

These are my goals, and I work toward achieving them every day. I am also informed of the events and issues that face the world around me. This can be attributed to Mr. Perez's belief that blind people need to be keenly aware of the complex world that surrounds them; that way, they can be inspired to make a difference. Mr. Perez and I often discussed world news and expressed our philosophical ideas, and I believe that all visually impaired students should have these conversations with their teachers or parents.

Along with my goals of academic and daily living skills, I have hobbies and talents that include sports, music, reading, and public speaking. Like most other Americans, sports such as basketball and baseball and genres of music such as classic rock and classical orchestral works are at the peak of my interests.

Although I am a fan of movies and television, I prefer reading, which has more substance, and watching live sports, which we trust to be real, unlike reality television and other media productions. I am fortunate to also have traveled to many places around the world that many others have not had the privilege to, such as Hong Kong, Italy, and China. I have visited historic sites such as the Roman Coliseum and the Great Wall, and as I say, one can learn more in a day's worth of travel than in years living at home.

Caitlin Mei Kasalo

Age: 14

"I may not have sight, *but I do have vision!*" I intend to use this vision to bring true justice for mankind. My vision is to make the world a safer, more peaceful place for all people. I had envisioned being a neural surgeon, but I understood with maturity that taking that career path was not practical. I wanted to save lives, and I still will do just that. I will bring criminals of all kinds to justice, which will in turn save many lives.

I was born in a poor city in China. My mother had no choice but to give me away. She had no idea that I was born with cataracts. I could have had perfect sight, but China did not have the money or necessary equipment to give me the surgery. In China, girls are worthless since they lack the strength of men to run the family farm: it is also believed that women are not as intelligent as men. Women are prohibited from having more than one baby due to the massive population. She made a very wise choice. She left me on the doorsteps of an orphanage. I do not remember my mother since I only had five or so hours with her, but leaving me on the doorsteps of an orphanage was the best thing that ever happened to me. I survived five and a half difficult years there. I had no soap, proper toilets, or clean water, and hardly any food. I knew no different since those were the conditions I had come to know.

I had known a year beforehand that I was going to receive parents. The day came at last. They brought me to the United States, which would be my home from then on. I smiled for three months straight without a single frown. I would even smile in my sleep. I felt like the happiest child that ever walked the earth. My parents loved me like no one else had. It was the first time I had ever experienced love. I was in darkness without knowing, but soon found myself in heart-filled light. My parents brought me to numerous doctors, but they all had said that it was hopeless for me to ever see anything since the brain teaches the eyes to see from birth, and I hadn't seen for almost six years.

Finally one doctor performed the surgery with minimal success. Even he was doubtful for the hope of any sight. I saw colors very well and large shapes, but no details. My right eye was the least damaged. Eight glorious years passed by. Then my retina detached. I was neither sad nor upset. I accepted this very easily because I knew in my heart that my sight would not last forever. My parents took it with much sadness because they felt giving me sight was the best gift they could have given me, and now it was gone.

My parents encourage and motivate me. I would not be where I am or the individual I am without their support and guidance. Sight was not the best gift they had given me. My parents were the greatest gift given to me. They are more than any jackpot.

Then God blessed me with a brother from Thailand in 2003. I chose a blind brother even though my father wanted someone deaf. I felt I could help someone blind like myself. We instantly noticed

that he was deaf as well as blind. I was devastated and upset. I did not understand why or how this could happen. Miraculously, doctors found that he had twenty to thirty percent of hearing in his right ear. I worked tirelessly for three long years to help him talk. This miracle happened when we came back from a cruise in 2006 in early April. I was overjoyed!

My life is magnificent! I used to swim competitively and made it into State back in Indiana. I quit swimming and decided to take singing lessons because of my passion for singing. Singing, swimming for fun, and reading are my all-time hobbies. I sing songs from Broadway musicals mostly and love it. I am proud to say that I have three very incredibly loving friends that have a heart of gold. It was hard to leave them when I moved to Las Vegas last year in the middle of July. They do not care that I am blind. They love me just the way I am, and I love the way they are. It is easy for them to forget that I am blind. I really do not have any more friends besides my three golden friends, which is satisfactory for me. I am a 4.0 student and will not accept anything less. It is an honor for me to have been elected president of the National Junior Honor Society this year. I put my best self out to the world. My parents are my biggest inspiration for every great thing I accomplish.

I do have some challenges that I face every day. I take twice as long to do something such as my homework. I have a hard time learning things that are visual such as geometry. Although my life is easy, people are afraid to be around me simply because they do not know how to respond to a blind person, even though I act

completely normal. Everyone has difficulties. I feel mine are minor compared to what I have seen, including broken families, deadly illnesses, and weak relationships.

My blindness has never stopped me from doing anything. I have set high goals that I will achieve. I want to go to Harvard to study law. I hope to work at a major law firm in Boston as a prosecuting attorney. I intend to become a judge after a while. My ultimate goal and dream is to be appointed a U.S. Supreme Court Justice. I will never give up no matter what life decides to throw at me.

Another gift that was given to me was an excellent education. In China, children start school at the age of three. I was never sent to school because disabled individuals are claimed to be incapable of doing well in academics or anything for that matter. I look forward to going to school every day. I have a great thirst for knowledge.

It is said that, "The only thing you truly own is what you know." I have a fascination with history. I want to go to so many places to learn more in depth about the history. I feel having an education is vital because today's students will be tomorrow's leaders. Learning has always given me a rush of excitement. The fact that only ten percent of the blind community know how to read braille saddens me and frightens me. It also worries me how little parents care about their child's education and future. I will continue to follow "the road less traveled." Education is a necessity along with love, and a family to call your own who support and encourage you.

Like I said, "I may not have sight, but I do have vision." I will make a difference in the lives of others for the better. I will use every

experience and turn it into something positive. My parents will always be the biggest heroes and inspiration of my life. Blindness will never stop me from doing anything. I will never forget to be grateful for all that I have especially for the love that surrounds me every day. At my brother's side, I will continuously be. I will shoot for the stars and share all that I have with others less fortunate than me. My lifetime goal will be true justice for the sake of humankind. When I am a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, education will be a very important issue to address. My family will always come first. I would even die for them if I had to.

Christian Perez

Age: 16

Sighted people may think that my life is hard, but in reality it's not as bad as they think. Life in general is full of ups and downs —blind or not— it just depends on how you deal with them. My story is pretty ordinary. I've accomplished things as well as failed at them. However, if you define yourself not by what you've accomplished, but by what you haven't, you'll end up in a state of depression. Even though it's hard to fail when you achieve something after, it feels relieving in some ways.

At birth I was three months premature, and I weighed a pound and a half. Being premature I stayed at the hospital for the first four months of my life. Later my family found out that I was blind when I was about seven months because they noticed unusual things with my eyes. Since then it's been the same for sixteen years and I think it will stay that way for another sixty.

All of my school years have been pretty normal, for example I go to a mainstream school, I don't take any special education classes and I walk with my cane. I read braille, and I use a computer-like device called a Braille Notetaker, which is a very innovative piece of technology. However, I do have a mobility instructor and an aide who helps me in the subject that I'm not good at, which is math (all those numbers and lines don't make much sense to me.)

As I said at the beginning, I've had some pretty good things happen in my life —for example I got to compete in the National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC. It was great fun and I got to experience many firsts like it was the first time that I got to go on an airplane. It was also the first time that I had been interviewed by a couple of reporters from huge news networks who wanted to know more about me. I also went on tours of one of the Smithsonian museums. It was an exhibit on chiefly Native American art and culture. There was a docent who gave me a guided tour and also told me that she was a member of the Shawnee tribe.

Before the Bee though, I had participated three times in a competition called The Blind Olympics. It was in San Diego and there were many other blind people and some were partially sighted as well. We participated in three running events, which were the ones that I did best in. Then I got a couple of medals and ribbons, but I don't remember what places they were. I also said that I've failed at many things as well, but I really won't touch that subject much anymore because no one likes discussing their mishaps in life. So now I'll tell you some of the things I enjoy doing and simply just enjoy.

Some of my favorite things to do are reading, going on the internet, writing whatever is on my mind (stories and poetry of which I will include this essay).

The thing I love most is listening to music —after all it is a universal language and can convey many emotions in an efficient amount of time.

I might as well wrap things up by saying that all in all, young people should not be defined by any physical abnormality or flaw. However, I think we should be defined by the things that make us individual on the inside. If people only looked at things on the outside they'd just see a fraction of what anything is.

Fernando Macias

Age: 14

I was born in Manzanillo, Colima, Mexico. I have a sister and a brother. They are both younger than me. I live in Tracy, California and I go to school at the California School for the Blind and I also go to a regular junior high school. I am interested in goalball, and I am on the goalball team. We plan on going to Oregon. I also like soccer. I am a very sociable person and I have lots of friends at both the California School for the Blind and the public junior high school. I am very well liked by everybody that I know.

As a little child in Mexico I lived on a farm with my parents. I would help my dad with the farming, planting, and milking the cows. I held on to my dad so I could feel what he was doing. When I was about six years old I learned how to ride a horse and a donkey. One day my dad bought me a bike, I told him to take the training wheels off. At first I had trouble staying on, but after a while I was able to keep my balance.

Everybody in my community knew each other, and they all looked out for me. However, living there for me was like living in the Dark Ages for the Europeans. I had to do lots of things that put me in danger. I had to do difficult tasks that required lots of vision such as using a chain saw to cut down tree branches, and a machete in the field. This was very frightening because I could not see.

The trip to the United States was very difficult for me. There was a small group of people on the trip with me, including my mom. At this time I was only seven years old. In the beginning we were nearly poisoned. Then I had to walk across the desert for four days non-stop. We were without food for most of the trip. We only had food on the first day.

It was on the third day that we got to drink water for the first time. We drank from a dirty pond where animals drank. On the fourth day we were met by a group of people with trucks. They drove us to Los Angeles. From there my dad took us to San Jose.

After I got here I faced new challenges. My first challenge was getting into school. The first school I went to I only stayed for a week because the teachers and students mistreated me. Then I had to wait a whole year to get into school again. At age eight I started going to a school where I had to learn English and braille at the same time. I was motivated enough to practice at home as much as I practiced at school. During the next four years I was starting to make friends. Things were going good but I wasn't learning everything I needed to be independent.

CSB has been a great school for me. I am learning many things that I wouldn't have learned without being here. I have become more sociable. I also learned how to use a regular computer for the first time. I am licensed to go out of the school without supervision. It has also helped me raise my self-esteem. Now I have hopes and dreams that I am working towards. My hopes and dreams are to go to college and get a well-paid job.

Hannah Chen Shibi

Age: 16

Let me tell you how I came to be named Hannah Chen Shibi Chadwick-Dias. Hannah was the American name I chose for myself when I came to the United States as an almost teenager in 2004. Chen was the name given to me by the orphanage I lived in for two years in China, which was located in Chenzhou. Shibi (which means “poet, jade green” in Mandarin) was the name given to me by my foster grandparents who I lived with from birth to 9 years old. Chadwick and Dias are the last names of my adoptive parents.

That I was born in China and left by my birth parents, spent my childhood with a visual impairment in a Chinese foster family and orphanage, then adopted by American parents as a 12-year-old all have contributed to who I am as a visually impaired teenager. When I lived in China with my foster family, I was not sent to school because we lived in a rural area. My foster family did not let me do very much for fear for my safety.

I was also not allowed to go to school when I lived in the orphanage, even though there was a school nearby, where many of the other orphanage children went. In the orphanage I mostly took care of the younger children and did handwork. Later I was taught how

to write my name in Chinese in clay but I didn't learn to read and write and was never exposed to braille. I learned some songs and poetry.

Since I was adopted in 2004, I have been attending school and learned braille and how to read and write. I enjoy reading good books on audio and braille. Writing has been harder for me than reading but I would like to be a writer when I grow up.

As a visually impaired teenager, I do most of the things that my sighted peers do except that I use a BrailleNote or a Perkins brailler for schoolwork and a white cane for mobility. I now attend a Waldorf methods school where music and art are incorporated into all the subjects. We create our own textbooks. The only problem is that they don't always adapt physical education for blind students. At my previous school, the teacher did not include me in the class very often but at this school my teacher makes sure that I'm included in all class activities.

Recently I went to China with my family and one of the things we did was to visit a school for the blind in Changsha, Hunan Province. I was surprised to find out that they did not have any writing devices other than slates and stylus, not even a Perkins brailler. I was also surprised that the staff did not expect most of the students to go to college but to study a vocation like massage. As an adult, I would like to help change the attitudes of people toward disability in countries like China where visually impaired people are often held back by the way that they are perceived.

After high school, I would like to attend college. Then as an adult I would like to help visually impaired children in other countries who don't have the opportunities that I do. I would like to advocate for all visually impaired children to get a good education and help them get access to the technology they need to assist them at school and work.

Kayla Bentas

Age: 16

At the age of 9 in April of 2000, I became blind due to a benign brain tumor which crushed my optic nerve, and affected my sense of smell and growth. After the surgery, I was also happy that I didn't have any more headaches. While being in the hospital, I celebrated my 10th birthday and got a portable CD player. It was a very scary thing that had happened to me and I was very worried about being able to go to the same school with my friends and being able to read books and to continue my accelerated reading competition.

In June of 2000, I had a tutor for the rest of my 3rd grade. On June 5, I met my Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI), Pamela Sudore. She came to my house after I came home from the hospital and taught me how to read again using braille. In a matter of 4 months, I had learned the entire literary braille code, which usually takes 1 to 2 years. In addition, she taught me how to get around with orientation & mobility techniques.

Since I was able to learn these special skills so quickly, I was able to enter the 4th grade, and I was an A+ student. I was interviewed for the newspaper and on the channel 5 news because of my accomplishments.

For the next few years I became proficient in technology and braille, and wanted to have my own equipment. My family and I decided to make and sell chocolate candy to raise money to buy my own equipment for home. My goal was to raise approximately \$5,000, and instead I raised over \$8,000 in 3 months. I decided to help other students get their own equipment with my extra fundraising by creating a non-profit organization called "Kayla's Vision." My hope for "Kayla's Vision." is to help visually impaired and blind students in Peabody and the surrounding area with funding for equipment, camps, grants, and scholarships. It has been a great success so far with raising another \$15,000 from our first fundraiser, a golf tournament, in the fall of 2007. This money will help other blind and visually impaired students to have the same things people with vision get or do which do not cost them.

Another activity I became involved in was making a career plan. When I was a freshman, I worked with a teacher working on an advanced master's degree to help students with disabilities develop a personal career plan. I was able to develop a resume and portfolio and I was employed at a day-care during the summer as a receptionist and assistant teacher.

Kayleigh Joyner

Age: 15

Fifteen years ago I was born in Houston, Texas, weighing only 1 pound and 7 ounces. I have been visually impaired all of my life and have known no difference. From the very beginning my mom has allowed me to just be a normal kid and hasn't placed any limitations on me, which has helped me to develop a "can do" attitude.

I enjoy riding my bike, roller skating, ice skating, and water skiing. Last year I was on my school swim team and competed in several events. I have been involved in choir since I was five years old.

Some of the challenges that I face are people's perception of me. They think that I need all of this help and that just because I use a cane that I can't see anything, when in reality that is not the truth at all.

I attend public school with sighted teens and am in regular classes including one advanced class. The students at my school view me in different ways. Some view me as a regular person that just has trouble seeing, while others see me as "the blind girl". I have some modifications that help me in school that most of the times are met. Sometimes they are not and that is where I have to stand up for myself and advocate for what I need.

I would also like to be involved with mentoring and meeting other teens who are blind or visually impaired.

In the future, after I graduate from college, I would like to be a teacher. I would like to teach elementary or special education. I would like to coordinate music into whatever I teach.

I have friends that are sighted and some that are blind or visually impaired. I think that it is good to have friends that can see perfectly and friends that have trouble seeing. When you are with your sighted friends you learn how to interact with the sighted world. When you are with your friends that have trouble seeing you can really relate to what they are going through and give them advice on how to get through certain situations.

During the summer I attend various camps throughout the state. I enjoy going to these camps because you get to meet new people and strike up new friendships. You can also experience different activities that you might have thought were impossible. For example water skiing, rock climbing, caving, high ropes course, and archery. At one camp I got to be in a rock band and learn how to play the guitar and at the end of it we had a performance to show our families what we had learned. Camps provide lots of new experiences and are a lot of fun to attend.

I would like to change the perspectives about people who are blind or visually impaired. I feel like some people think that we have trouble walking or aren't as smart as other people. Some people think that we can't answer questions. I am no different than anyone else. The only thing is that I have trouble seeing. I just see people and life in a different way.

Leslie Mora

Age: 15

Lit was a warm and breezy day towards the end of July. It was only just after dawn, but the sun was already shining brightly. It seemed a perfect day for a child to come into the world, and indeed it was. On July 25, 1992, at 5:45 A.M., a little girl was born. This little girl was named Leslie Caroline Mora, Lizzie to her family and friends.

Leslie was born in Brawley, a small town in Southern California. When she was born, the doctors thought that she was a perfect and healthy baby. Today, she still is, except that there is one little thing that makes her different. She is blind.

At first everything seemed normal. The baby was healthy. Nothing seemed to be wrong. But two months after the child was born, her mother noticed that when she called to her daughter, the baby would not look at her. She took the little girl to a doctor where she learned of the child's problem. It was a great shock to Leslie's mother, but soon she began to look for ways to help the child.

The child was first taken to an eye doctor who prescribed glasses for her. The Lions Club decided to help the child and obtained the glasses for her. When the child was three years old, she was discovered by the Visually Impaired Department of the Imperial

County. Since then, she has received academic support. She began by learning how to read letters in braille and numbers in the nemeth code.

Soon after this, the child began school. She wasn't put in special education classes, because in truth, the little girl was intelligent so she was placed in general education. The teachers loved her, because even though she had a disability, she always tried her best to fit in with the rest of the children.

And so Leslie continued to go to school. She began to get involved in things. She learned how to play the piano and joined her church choir. She learned how to roller skate, to ride a bike, and to ice skate. When she was eight she got a horse for her birthday, and she learned how to care for it as well as ride it. She also helped out on the farm where she kept her horse by feeding the sheep and cows.

When Leslie was a fourth grader, she won two blue ribbons for running. When she began fifth grade, Leslie started playing the flute in the school band. She was very good, and her teacher made her first chair. Later, Leslie began to go to various music camps with her church where she could better her flute skills and could get more advanced vocal instruction.

At the beginning of seventh grade, Leslie joined the marching band and also became a member of her school student council which she was a member of up until she started high school. In the middle of her first year in junior high, Leslie's physical education teacher and student council advisor asked Leslie to work at the school's

student store. Leslie agreed and began working. Her first job was to unload and sort things for the people who sold at the counter. She was a hard working girl and one month later, she was selling things at the counter. Apart from being involved in many school activities, Leslie was very involved with her church, the Salvation Army. She played the flute and piano on Sundays and sang with the church band. She joined their Bible Competition team and their Girl Guard program.

When Leslie began her freshman year in high school, she was a little frightened, but being an optimistic person and good student she began making friends and earning awards for her hard work. In the middle of the year, her English teacher recommended Leslie for the Gate English class and she was accepted into the class in the second semester.

Today, fifteen years after that warm and breezy day in July, Leslie is a sophomore and has good grades. She still receives help from the Visually Impaired Department and gets her materials from them, as well as an aide in her math class to help her keep up with her notes. Leslie is still a member of the marching band, the concert band, and is learning how to play the saxophone. Recently, Leslie became a member of her school's mock trial team where she is learning about law.

She is still in the Gate English class which she enjoys. She is also still very active in her church. Leslie is very thankful to her mother who, despite being Leslie's only parent at home, has managed to keep Leslie a healthy and intelligent girl. Also, because she has

always been there to support her when she thought that her disability could keep her from doing things she wanted to do.

Leslie's friends say that she is a great example to them, because she is living proof that a blind person can do anything they want to do. Her plans for the future are to graduate from high school, go to college, study psychology and music and, eventually, have a family.

Mac Potts

Age: 16

My name is Mac Potts. I am a sophomore at Kalama High School. Most of my life has been happy and exciting. By God's will, I was born without sight. However, He gave me a much more valuable gift: music. I have had support from many people since I played my first piano song. Relating to many peers at school is virtually impossible. Adults and musicians are much easier to get along with. Most of my school teachers have been very appreciative of my talents, but many of my peers do not care. Music is not all that I enjoy. However, it is what much of my life is based on.

I am the third child of five in my immediate family. To the sadness of my parents, I was blind at birth. But an event would soon happen that would replace their sorrow with joy. One day I played a nursery rhyme on the piano. My father and mother knew that I was blessed with a marvelous musical gift. They decided to find a teacher for me. While my mother was looking for advice on scrapbooking, she found a young woman who taught children at a very young age. I began taking classical piano in the Suzuki method.

Several years went by. I had graduated from the first two books of Suzuki piano. I was attending Washington State School for the Blind, where I was given many opportunities, such as performing

in talent shows. They even flew me to Kentucky to play in a classical recital.

As for normal classes, I struggled with math at first, but as my music skills increased, so did my ability to do difficult problems. By the time I left WSSB, all school subjects were easy. I moved to the Kalama school, since I had been living in that town for all but three years of my life. This decision seemed excellent at the beginning. My teachers enjoyed me, even though I was very hyper. Knowing that I had a talent, my music director let me accompany my class in the Christmas program, Grandmother's Tea, and other events.

But soon innocence began to disappear, as I became immersed in a world of filthy language and innuendos. It was becoming more and more difficult to relate to peers at school. By being ridiculed and made fun of, I learned rude connotations of normal vocabulary words. Eventually, I put their childish attitudes out of my mind, but this would not be the end.

For my eleventh birthday I received my first real electric piano. Although not full size, it could record my music.

With this piano, I performed at many benefits, gatherings, and local outdoor events. These were not usually for money, but for joy and exposure. My name was beginning to be known from Woodland to Longview.

Fifth grade came and went. Other than changing piano teachers, nothing really significant happened that year. Summer came with a life-changing event. At the Portland Blues festival I met D.K.

Stewart, a well-known musician in Portland. He gave my mom his number, and talked about lessons. Learning the Blues would be very exciting.

Sixth grade was fun, except for the few times that I was crammed with homework. I was a percussionist in the beginning band, but that was too easy. The class was only worth it because I got to jam on the drums. But it became even harder to relate to kids at school. Kids were dating and breaking up in middle school. Pretty crazy. This completely separated me from my peers, because I had no thought of dating at such a young age. I wondered if some of these kids would ever grow up.

When school ended, I began taking lessons from D.K. Stewart. He worked with me on riffs, timing, and soloing. He even played with me at my first real stage gig at the Kalama Blues festival. That was the highlight of the whole summer. To add to the fun, I had received a full-size keyboard that could record more tracks and could play in stereo.

Over that summer, I had been learning the alto saxophone. When school came, I began playing this instrument in the intermediate band. After going through three broken saxophones, and being criticized for having awful tone by the new teacher, I rented one from a store in Vancouver, and my tone improved immediately. This teacher was either jealous of me, or not very nice. He gave me no opportunity to enter the school Blues band, saying that I was not in high school. However, two members were in my grade. He and I would never truly get along from that day on.

Luckily, at the end of that year, I was in a Blues band. Through D.K. Stewart and other friends, I joined Ben Rice and the Youth of Blues. All summer we toured the Northwest. We even played at the Portland Waterfront Blues Festival.

Even though eighth grade brought nice teachers, bullies began to pick on me every day. The talk was no longer easy to ignore. My vocabulary always had a double meaning.

Since I was not the kid to let it go, I turned it right back on these dysfunctional kids.

I was relieved to take a short trip to New Orleans in April. The vacation was a blast. I now had a nicer saxophone that Reggie Houston, a great horn player and a great friend, had sold to me. New Orleans was heaven because people appreciated my music, and I related to the numerous musicians down there. When I returned home, the bullies went right back to messing with me. I was glad to be done with school that year.

Summer brought many gigs with the Ben Rice band. We won a competition to go to Memphis to compete in the International Blues Challenge. Shortly after this I attended a jazz camp, mainly for young musicians. To me, this was the real world. Everyone understood my language, and there was no negative talk or bullying.

High school was hardly any better than previous years. One bully was not good enough. It seemed that two parties had formed. The rowdy group of boys caused trouble everywhere. Many of

these kids were decent by themselves, but were insane together. Worse yet, there was the mean and cruel group of boys, who went out of their way to pick on specific people. I was one of their targets. To top it off, these two groups constantly argued with each other, causing terrible chaos and disarray in school.

At one point, my mother thought that something should be done with these morons before they could do any harm. Sad to say, her fear came true. A fifteen-year-old kid, who was my worst enemy in middle school, stole his mother's car. During lunch, he took some buddies for a joyride. He got into a major accident, killing a girl. One boy would never walk again. Two others would be in the hospital for about a month. The driver and another passenger walked away. That passenger was the most mean-spirited and uncaring boy in the school. That clique immediately broke up, because the driver could no longer hang out with them, having learned a tragic life lesson.

To summarize the musical events of my freshman year, I competed in that Blues Challenge in Memphis, returned to New Orleans, and participated in the Braille Challenge in Los Angeles, where I won my division. During that summer, I continued to play with Ben Rice and Reggie Houston. In August, I played in Ohio at a boogie festival and took part at the jazz camp in Oregon again. In all of these situations, I felt at home, enjoying, understanding, and getting along with my fellow musicians and adults. My peers at the Braille Challenge related to me, because they were all intelligent and many had musical abilities.

This year I've noticed maturity in some of the bullies, but many have not changed at all. I relate to the few musicians in school, plus the students that participate in Knowledge Bowl. But my peers are musician friends, teachers, and other adults. They appreciate my musical talents and are much easier to get along with than kids at school.

My friends have given me many amazing and exciting opportunities throughout my entire life. I am very grateful for my mentors, family, and friends who have supported me as a musician. But most of all, I would like to thank my Father in Heaven who blessed me with the marvelous gift of music.

Naomi Scott

Age: 16

In 2005 I won the Nationals Personality Pageant in Stockton, California, and placed second in the USA Nationals Personality Pageant in Orlando, Florida. It was an educational opportunity that gave me even more public speaking experience.

Since high school I've been an active member of Free the Children Organization. We sponsor a child in Somalia and we are fundraising to build a school in Rwanda. I study many African languages, self taught on the internet and am fluent in Fongbe and Yoruba so far. Also, in school this year I have been learning Spanish.

One of my passions is to make a difference in the world and help educate and empower children and women. One of my goals is to provide clinics for early diagnosis and treatment of children with retinoblastoma in underdeveloped countries. Another goal is to make visually impaired resources available in those and other communities and countries.

Education specific to visually impaired students is fundamental. Also more awareness needs to develop with the sighted public that the blind are just people too who happen to be blind and sometimes need a different way to get a same thing done. I am fortunate to have many good VI resources here in America. I am

lucky to have a family that is informed and advocates, and a school team that's trained and experienced, and I have access to many blind organizations. With all that support I am doing very well. It concerns me that much of the world does not support their visually impaired children as well. Even in America, not all visually impaired students are supported as they need. A very capable person must stay up-to-date on all resources, and live the motto 'where there's a will, there's a way'.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my ideas about education for the blind youth. My name is Naomi Scott, I'm a sixteen-year-old sophomore and I live in Grass Valley, California, USA. I was born in Hawaii, where I was diagnosed with bilateral retinoblastoma, a cancer of the eye affecting children. I have been blind since the age of two years old.

Children's rights and issues of blind youth are two topics that are extremely important to me. I have been actively involved in promoting awareness of blindness, childhood cancer and children's rights for as long as I can remember.

During my personal fight with cancer, I participated in a UCSF Beckman Vision Center video, a national campaign led by my pediatric ophthalmologist, Dr. Joan O'Brien, promoting early diagnosis, treatment and research, to better educate doctors, hospitals and families about retinoblastoma with hopes to save more children's vision and their lives.

For many years I've been a promotional spokesperson for Guide Dogs for the Blind. I received my dog, Ingris, when I was twelve

years old. Ingris and I were the first in the world to be teamed, as a 'change of career dog' paired with a blind youngster under the age of sixteen. The new program, Canine Buddies, provides hands on experience, companionship and awareness of future guide dog use.

Sacramento Society for the Blind has a very active youth program, I have been a spokesperson for their educational campaigns which show on billboards and air on radio.

America has a booklet, the VI Guidelines, that was last updated in 1997, but the Guidelines are strictly suggestions, they are not made into laws. Also, the National Federation of the Blind developed a National Agenda in 1999 with ten goals; again it is suggested ideas, not laws. The Agenda gives recommendations for an expanded curriculum that teaches specific blind related skills within the regular school work. In 2002 America began a law that braille must be taught if needed, and in 2006 another law that school textbooks are to be available in braille at the same time as sighted students. Also, as a regulation, American high schools have a transition program, which informs and prepares visually impaired teens of options, at age of maturity, for work opportunity, independent living, and continued education.

The mandates to teach braille, if needed, and offer braille textbooks on time, are enforceable by federal and state laws, but in reality some students may not receive it at all or on time. The regulation of high school transition is enforceable only to the extent that student and family strive to make the provisions happen. What

may look like good plans on paperwork must be lived as practical experience.

I believe the three basics of visually impaired education are orientation and mobility, braille and technology. First orientation and mobility should be taught because it teaches to explore, travel and be safe in the environment, and along the way increases independent living skills. Orientation and mobility also includes learning to advocate for yourself in every situation in life. Strong orientation and mobility skills are important to survive and succeed in our modern world.

Learning braille offers opportunities to communicate and abilities to learn. Braille literacy helps make it possible to become more independent and have more opportunities in life. There have been many advances in braille resources, accessible libraries, quality production, interpoint, modified formats, graphic embossers and embossers with speech capability. Personal braille devices offer many choices of portability and multifunction.

VI technology allows even more communication and independence. Worldwide resources are available with VI technology of talking computers and braille notetakers accessing the internet. VI technology allows learning alongside peers in mainstream schools. Talking software for many items such as computers, cellular phones, book readers, money readers and color readers, to name a few, promote communication and independence.

I am grateful for all the opportunities and support I have had so far. I look forward to many adventures in life and hope that

I will find happiness and success in helping other people. My VI education has helped me become the person I am today. I realize, even in America let alone the entire world, that not all have the resources and support in their VI education. It is one of my goals to help children everywhere have more information, access and support for a better life in the world.

Sadi Taylor

Age: 14

The eyesight of the average human is 20/20. Imagine having 20/800 vision. This means that what most people can see at 800 feet away, people with 20/800 vision see at 20 feet away. Being visually impaired is hard enough. But what would it be like as a visually impaired teenager?

Fourteen-year-old Sadi Taylor of Beaverton has Optic Nerve Hypoplasia (ONH). ONH affects the optic nerve. This nerve sends images from the eye to the brain so that the brain identifies the image. In Taylor's case, the optic nerve was never fully formed.

When Taylor was a baby, the doctor told her mother that Taylor would only see colors or shapes. She actually turned out to have no vision at all in her right eye, and has 20/800 in her left. She needs a walking cane for traveling in public, but not in familiar places like school and home. Taylor prefers to read large print rather than braille, uses a monocular (a binocular with only one lens), a magnifying glass and listens to audio books. Being a visually impaired teenager is not easy, especially worrying about school, social life, sports activities and other things. Taylor goes to a public school, Arts and Communication Magnet Academy.

"I like school. But I am easily stressed from having trouble getting information from the board and keeping up with music in band",

she explains. "I also have trouble with finding activities to do. Sports are hard because I cannot see what is going on."

Many people might spend their spare time reading, watching TV, playing basketball or playing catch. "After a while reading hurts my eyes and so does TV. I can't just go shoot hoops or play catch. I'll get smacked in the face", she says.

Taylor enjoys riding horses, riding bikes, skating, trampolines, drawing, singing, playing the trumpet, acting and being with friends.

"I can do most of the things that sighted people can do. I may have to work twice as hard but if I want to do it, it will be done."

"Taylor is proud and stubborn. She refuses to read braille but doesn't let her vision get in her way. She is amazing", says Phil, a close friend of Taylor's.

She does not like it when people treat her like a baby. "I'm blind, not stupid. And people don't need to be talking about me, because I'm not deaf either. Also, don't take advantage of me because I am aware of what's going on."

As a child, it might have been difficult to explain things like this to others when she had such a small vocabulary. It was hard for her to explain how she felt and how she could be helped.

"Kids used to walk up to me, put their hands in my face and yell "How many fingers am I holding up?".

All Sadi wants is to be treated like a normal person, and she wonders if that is too much to ask. "Don't judge people by what's wrong with their bodies", she says.

Her father, Samuel Taylor, always says: "I wish I could give Sadi my eyesight".

Taylor protests. "If you ask me, being who I am is a huge blessing, and I wouldn't change it even if I could. Just because you have more vision than I do does not make you a better person than I am. We are all equal. If you can become a famous actress then I can too. I am willing to work hard at what I want. My lack of sight means nothing. That does not change who I am inside. But if you can't see past the outside, you have a lot to learn".

A person with a disability is not any less capable or any less smart than a person without a disability. They may need to work harder or even find ways to work around obstacles to achieve their goals. Their brains still think and their hearts still feel. So now instead of thinking of them as having a disability, think of them as being blessed human beings. Try walking in their shoes to better understand them.

Samantha Covington

Age: 16

I was born in California. I was adopted at the age of three. I lost some of my sight at nine years old. My older brother has the same eye condition. My eye condition is called Stargardt's disease. I can only see out of the sides of my eyes. I cannot see very well at night. When I first told my mom and dad they did not believe me. It took at least two months for them to realize that I was not making it up. When they finally took me to an eye doctor, the doctor said that I had the same condition as my brother. They did not do a real test. The doctor just assumed that since my brother had an eye condition, I would have the same.

When I was younger I played soccer. I loved playing soccer with my friends. I would have to block the ball from getting to the other side. But now I cannot even see the ball when it is coming. When I was in middle school I had a hard time making friends. I hated using my cane on school grounds because people would stare. So I stopped using it. Then I was told that I had to use it going home. Well I did, and people started calling me a liar. People would see me using my cane and ask me if I am faking it. I would always tell them no and that it was against the law to have a cane if you are not blind or visually impaired.

When people asked me questions about my eye sight, I would feel out of place. Most people would think that I am a clutz because I

sometimes would trip on a step or bump into a chair. This went on for a while, at least until I went to CSB. CSB stands for California School for the Blind. I came to CSB when I was 14 years old, CSB is in Fremont, which is northern California, and I live in southern California, so I have to fly to school every week. I go home on Fridays and come back to school on Sundays. During the week at school, I live in the dorm.

I love going to school here. Everyone here is either blind or visually impaired. I feel comfortable at school. I feel very strange saying that, but it is true.

I love feeling like I belong. The only thing is that when I am doing mobility, I have to use my cane and a monocular. I do not mind using the cane as much anymore, but I hate using the monocular. I feel like people are watching me. Some people like the attention, but I don't; I like to blend in but still be noticed.

When I am at school, I can be independent and get help when I need it. But at my other school people treated me as if I could not do things on my own. They would treat me like a person who could not think or understand things. I always felt dumb.

Thomas Class

Age: 16

When I was 14 years old, being driven home from sports camp for the blind, my mother had to retrieve the mail. So to the post office we went. There I received the greatest thing I have ever gotten, well one of the greatest: a cow bison tag.

A bison tag allows the person who drew it to hunt and kill one bison. So a few months later my father and I travelled many miles to a remote area in Delta, Alaska. When I got there I had to attend a seminar about hunting rules. There I was given an 'either-sex exemption'. This is not usually offered, but because of my visual disability, I needed the legal flexibility to shoot either a bull or a cow.

After about three days, we found a herd of about five bison. They were bulls. So we stalked in. I had to crawl on my stomach through snow, grass and trees. I looked through the scope while my father helped me aim, using a laser site: the Green Beam. At about 137 yards away, we acquired more meat for the freezer.

Besides hunting I do a lot of other things. Outdoors are like a second home. I hope to make a tree house this summer. My life is full of support by my family. My dad has introduced me to archery. My bow is adapted for a tandem and single shoot. I also

enjoy knives and swords. I possess a four foot long sword and I hope to have a spear by Christmas. In my spare time I also enjoy swimming and wrestling for my school team. I was the first visually impaired wrestler at my middle school and my high school.

I will occasionally go to my cabin. I will hunt grouse, and try to hunt rabbits. I successfully hunted a black bear two years ago. I have ice fished on local lakes, and I also enjoy handling alligators and snakes to teach others about science at the Imaginarium Science Center. Of course I value my best friends, Levi Minder and Kyle Olavar.

My goals in life are: go to state for wrestling, state for swimming, go to a job specialization school and travel around the world.

Some of my interests are: video games, lighting off fireworks like roman candles, swimming, nature walks with my gun, and being with my friends and family. I have a MySpace Account so I can keep in touch with the world. Also I have an instant message account. My family is enormous. I have relatives in several parts of the United States, and there are some in The Netherlands.

Because of my family, I have turned out the way I have. My mother, father, and sister treat me as sighted. I have accomplished taking third place in freestyle wrestling, hunted and successfully ‘bagged’ a bison and a bear, and been a volunteer science guide, presenting science programs for visitors at a science education center. With these accomplishments, I can hear myself succeeding at life in the future.

Vance "Bud" Davis

Age: 15

The U.S. Congress is addressing the problem of education in the United States. The President, George Bush, has issued the No-Child Left Behind Program. This is a program where children are given standardized tests annually to see if they are meeting the government's requirements for that grade. This program will also issue congress special powers over a school when that school's test scores have a 10 percentage rate of passing. Because of this my school will be changed by Congress over the next year.

The state has a test that students should be passing; however, because of our low passing rate, the federal government is discussing the matter. Next year there will be changes to improve test scores. Some of the revealed changes for my school begin with a day of 7 classes, and the exclusion of a rotating schedule. There is only speculation about the other changes scheduled to take effect. The rumors are many for teachers as well as students. Unfortunately, neither the students nor the teachers have any say regarding any of the proposed changes. The government is forcing the school to change in order to 'hopefully' gain better test grades. The uncertainty of all of this is so frustrating for me. I almost feel like I'm being punished, and I passed the test each year.

My school is the first in this region to go through such changes. According to our faculty, at one time or another, if this is successful, all schools will be forced to make these changes in order to achieve higher test scores.

Congress is voting for the bills that go with the President's No-Child Left Behind Policy. All of the regions in the U.S. have schools that are making the changes with the hope that our country's youth can achieve higher test scores. I think that having a goal of higher test scores is a good thing, but there are other tests such as the PSAT (a test designed for colleges to accept students) which is offered at my high school, but not for students with any special needs. I think that it is great because I can stay home late and not take the test. However, I suppose that it isn't very good for me especially since my goal is to attend college after I graduate. The mayor decided it would be a waste of money to pay to accommodate any special needs, especially since the test does not affect our State. At this point, this is what Congress is discussing about education. I would really like to be a part of this discussion since it directly impacts me, my education and my future.



Zambia

Mozambique

Harare

ZIMBABWE

Namibia

Botswana

South Africa

Indian Ocean

South Atlantic Ocean



Audrey Dangirwa

Age: 15

My name is Audrey and I am a girl whose age is fifteen. I learn at Waddilove High School, which is in Zimbabwe. I got blind in 2005.

I subscribe to the philosophy that all human beings are equal before God and indeed before any force anybody chooses to believe in. Every one of us is entitled to all the opportunities that mother earth provides. It is this conviction which has fuelled my determination to fight all obstacles, as a visually impaired teenager. I may sound discouraged in my story of how it all began, but believe you me, I have not allowed my disability to hinder any form of achievement in my life.

Stars seem so close, yet they are so far. It seems so sweet, but yet so sour, to cope with a new lifestyle, especially for a teenager like me. Yes, now I know the ups and downs of life. Life is not even fair. It is full of bad air, with not even one sweet song, to see and sing during the morning breeze, but the comforting thought is that life is what one makes it.

It all started incredibly. I could not name the place I was dreaming about. What I still remember is that I woke up screaming. I could not believe my eyes. Actually, my lack of them! It welled up in me and made me go down to the root of it, until my head span

with confusion. I then became as brainless as a chimpanzee. Truly speaking, at that time, death was better than life. Surely. I could not stop my tears of sorrow, grief and loneliness to stream down my hopeless face, when I got blind, at the beginning of my teenage years.

Youth live on hope and old people on remembrance. But if a wheel wears out, there is no way and the future seems hopeless. This painful incident caused strife and conflict in the whole clan of ours. I would break into tears almost each and every day. Like a dog, I would commune with myself the idea of dying, which always whirled round and round in my mind. Honestly, at that time my heart was fully committed to accepting death by any means. But there is this hero who was always there for me all the times. In times of temptations, oppression and troubles, she was by my side. Soft words win hard hearts. Eventually she did it. Due to her comforting words I began to see a little light flickering illuminating the path of my life. I give thanks to an angel of my shepherd. Mum! I salute you!.

It takes all sorts of people to make up a community. Some are there to throw cold water upon anything. They are there to discourage other people. Some of our neighbours began to reject my family. They regarded the whole clan as cursed. Some of them encouraged my parents to go to some traditional healers, so as to find out what had happened. I am grateful to my parents for remaining resolute and depending only on God for providence. My parents kept reminding me that every dog has its own day. Patience would reveal God's plans for me, they urged.

I have always wondered why some of the Christians should be rejected in the kingdom of God. My experience as a blind teenage girl has made me come face to face with the wickedness of Christians. Some even gave more pressure to my parents to consult some professional traditional healers and prophet, so as to find out the cause of my misfortune. Due to this big pressure my father began to lose hope. When new pillars stand together they can prevent rainfall from entering, but if the roaring thunder disturbs one of them, the other which remains is prone to dangers.

My parents began to quarrel all because of me, until my mother became a victim of high blood pressure and stress. They almost separated but it was not God's plan. When I reported this case to my faithful youth leader, he referred me to a female psychologist who had once been in the same situation. She counselled my parents and mended their marriage. Yes! Now I know. If you forgive and share, God will replace with more. They remained united.

Working hard is the key to success. In order to prove that I was still normal like any other child, I began to help my mother with household chores and in her knitting project. We made a lot of money and I became namely at realising the fruits of my labour. Those people who were laughing at my disability began to appreciate the fact that disability and inability are as different as chalk from cheese.

An idle mind is the devil's workshop. When my mum went home alone the idea of committing suicide haunted me again. In order

to avoid this, my parents sent me to school for they knew that knowledge is power. It was very hard, meeting new faces and adjusting to a new environment, but at last I managed. I began to learn braille. As education is the foundation of a bright future, I put my nose on grinding stone, on my core business. No sweat, no gains, I told myself. Eventually, I began to produce some high flying colours of results. Each time a little smile would dance at the corners of my mum's mouth, as she whispered: "That is my angel".

Leadership does not always start on a high note. But in life you have to know that there are some people who are born with some leadership qualities. Due to my confidence the members of staff made me a school prefect. At that time I realised that I should socialise with many people. A little learning from books only is a very dangerous thing, but to drink deeply from the fountain of socialising with many different people is a good thing.

I began to mingle with some different kinds of people, the poor, rich, the ignorant and the intelligent, the stubborn and friendly. Some accepted my qualities of leadership but some threw cold water upon them. Fortunately the Lord gave me a friend who was always there for me. Surely God will make a way when there seems to be no way.

A friend in need is a friend in deed. She always advised me and corrected me. We prayed so fervently for those who rejected me as a leader, so that God would show them the right way. Sometimes we would cry together. In life people come for a purpose. They

may bring peace in your life, teach you what you have never learnt about, they may make you laugh and make you happy. The worst part of it is that they only come for a sweet season. Unfortunately she passed away just when our friendship began to grow stronger.

It is very painful when someone special walks away from your life. That creates a vacuum that is difficult to fill. I only shed tears of sorrow and loneliness. This means that I was lonely again because every pupil seemed to reject my status. I met a friend who had bad faith. She only showed me some whitewash of friendship. There was nothing I could do because I was lonely. She loved money more than books. She was a prostitute. She wanted me to have some love affairs with some sugar daddies as what she was doing. I then realised that it was better to be alone than in bad company. Immediately I reported the case to the girl child network. At that second they took action. Those men were put in jail. I then realised that peer pressure is not beneficial. Yes! Our rights as girls are now being respected in this world.

My motto shall always be: "Backwards, never". The only vocabulary I tolerate in my life is "challenges", and not "problems". I hold my head high —not because I am pompous, but due to a strong realisation that I was made blind for a purpose. I therefore deplore, detest and denounce any attempts by anyone to try and ridicule the disabled, including the visually impaired. With the support of the whole community I am confident that I shall continue to add value to society and to justify my presence on this earth.

Cosmas Tshabalala

Age: 15

I am an African teenager with a visual impairment.

As a blind teenager, I have had both nice and bitter experiences, with the latter being more frequent. I have been exposed to ridicule, hatred, pity, love, acceptance and rejection, just to name a few.

I have spent days without friends only because of my blindness. The nicest times were when my dear mother was still alive. She was the pillar of my life, for my father had passed away a long time ago.

Some people accepted me for my mother's sake, while others ridiculed me to provoke her. Thank heavens she never had bitter feelings about me and accepted me the way I was.

When I was a baby my mother held me in her arms lovingly. To her I was and am still a blessing. This means I am useful and worthy to her. As a blind child she never made me feel unhappy, because I was her God-given gift, worth keeping and caring for. She knew and believed I was part of God's community, and tried by all means possible to meet my needs.

To me she was a shoulder to lean on, but death, the merciless viper, took her away from me. Her brother, my uncle, stepping

into her shoes, took over from where she left off. Following in her footsteps he fights tooth and nail to meet my needs. For him too my blindness is not a curse but a blessing. His family has joined him wholeheartedly, and my presence among them is considered a blessing. They support me to the full. May God bless them all.

I am blind, yes; without sight they look at me with sympathy as I stumble here and there without falling. They wonder how I make it to and from various places. They think they are more blessed than me, yet I am God's glory. Blindness is not a curse but God's glory.

Day and night are one to me. I recognise and attach names to the voices I have clearly recorded in my computer. My eyes are so bright and glowing in my brain, which is intact. The world is a field of my imagination.

Birds make a sweet melody of music to my ears. Through my sense of smell I get in touch with the odours, scents and aromas of the world. My fingers give meaning to what I read and write.

My friends wonder how I cope with school work and life in general, but the answer is clear. My brain is my eyes and my remaining senses compensate for the missing one and help me enjoy life.

Gone are the days when all those who were like me were regarded as garbage. With braille victory is assured. Sight is no gateway to success. Blind as I am, I attend school with my sighted peers. As a blind teenager I am very concerned about my education and future. And as I am I will achieve and achieve till I reach my goals up the ladder.

My wish is to have a bright future just like my sighted peers. My desire is to prove those around me wrong one day. I am striving for excellence day and night. My hope is to raise the Zimbabwean flag high as a successful blind man.

At school my teachers and classmates sympathise with me, while what I need is their love, support and above all acceptance. But all these are shown to a lesser extent because I am blind. What they do not know is that I derive the joy of life from my compensatory senses. What others visualise through sight is brought to my knowledge through these senses. Some people make assumptions and conclusions that I see with my heart. The truth is that my remaining senses enable me to live independently.

Some people believe that blind people only do well in certain subjects, hence they impose them on us. Allow me to disagree; given a chance, the sky is the limit.

Resources and attitudes limit us, and I do not need to be treated in any way differently. I am a human being like anybody else, but I am treated as subhuman.

Seeing me first, and then my blindness, is another story to those around me. I am blind, yes, but I have capabilities. Given a chance I can excel. To me blindness is not a permanent limitation, but those around me make it a big barrier. Of all the barriers I have encountered, those resulting from attitudes are top of the list.

My melodious voice is underutilised because I am not exposed to instruments due to scarcity or deprivation. I am not included in many activities because of my blindness.

Only once a year I have a chance to participate in sports activities. This is my only outing and I try to display my talents for further recognition. My hope is to be in the athletics or goalball national team. Nevertheless, half a loaf is better than nothing. I like and enjoy the national Paralympic games; may they continue till the heavens come down.

I might be blind, but the fact that I am a person and I am alive still remains.

Ladies and gentlemen; being blind does not change the fact that I am a person who has needs, feelings and rights. God created everyone for a purpose, including me. Why then do you plan to change this? I carry labels although I know I don't deserve them, but why do you, my fellow human beings, want to make my life unpleasant?

Remember I am God's creation and I was made in his image. All the names you attach to me are a criticism of God himself and his work. Do you think you will win the case before God? I do not think so.

Let me assure you I will turn a deaf ear to all mockery and continue to pull my socks up in order to achieve the goals I have set. Those around refer to me as a blind boy rather than a boy with blindness. To them I am useless, but I will prove myself right one day. One wonders exactly where this came from. In the bible there is no chapter or verse where it is written that blind people are useless. But here I am, despised and segregated because of blindness.

I always ask myself who said that blind people cannot do anything good. If they can, why are we not considered? We are sidelined. If they cannot, why are they not given shelter and food so that they can eat and sleep, since it seems that is the only thing you think they can do?

If everybody is not sure why don't you test them? Try it!

I have, on several occasions, been scolded for not accepting the influence to develop a dependence syndrome. I say no to begging and yes to independent living. I am always misunderstood and mocked, but I will stick to my desire to excel until I reach my goals. The likes of Connie Sibanda, Steve Kekena —a South African musician—and Stevie Wonder from America remain my inspiration. They have made music lively internationally.

My heart bleeds when I think of Zimbabwe's blind musician, Paul Matavire, whose music drove youth and adults wild with joy when he took to the stage. I then wonder why people are not satisfied with all I do and say. These people have been able to show that blindness does not mean inability.

Give me and my fellow blind youth a chance to show off our talents and you will be free to judge whether we can be functional or not. Don't judge a book by its cover.

Remember one can not tell the roughness of a path one has never used, but here you are concluding that I am useless. I deserve respect and opportunities.

My ears are saturated with provocative comments, but what wrong did I do? Did I ever apply to be different? Do you think I deserve

all these bitter feelings you cause me? Relieve me, remove me from the list of items that are useless, worthless and deserving of pity.

The ball is now in your court, and it is up to you to decide whether to continue or desist from judging without evidence.

Finally, I say blindness is not inability.

Ephas Hove

My life is composed of joy and sorrow playing a tug of war. At home I am well kept, given all that which I may be in need of, if available. Guidance and support are delivered to me just like food full of satisfaction.

As poor as my parents are and as unemployed as they are, they toil day and night to give me a bright future. They say sail even through difficult conditions never looking back, so as to help me earn a better living without despair.

At school I have to face a number of difficulties and problems. These can include reading books written in print which will create a hard and difficult condition and uneasy to sail through. So as to reduce this problem some people willingly help me read these books.

In most cases some people take advantage of my being partially sighted. They try several ways to get me angry over silly things. Of course this will make me angry for I am not used to this. Defenceless as I am, powerless as I am, I will find nothing to do towards the matter. They might come asking me rhetorical questions, but giving them the cold shoulder will be the answer to their nagging and bullying tactics.

As time goes on there will come the hour of my choice which I define as of praising and worshipping, giving glory and honour to the owner of it. This will also help me to quell all the evil thoughts against my bullies. This will also help me to have a clear understanding towards my life and God's plans over me and his desire to help me achieve my ambitions.

My life is composed of things which are even difficult to ponder upon and some which are attractive towards human eyes and my desire is to be a more civilised person.

Kudakwashe Huro

Age: 16

First and foremost, visually impaired students must be provided with free education. The state must have a directory board which caters for school fees. For the world to avoid the persecution, starvation and factionalism on the marginalised member of the society, the blind must be given the right to free education.

More so, visually impaired students, and especially those who are not partially sighted, must be the first to be enrolled in the educational institutions. Still on the part of education corruption must not be encouraged. The government must put in place ministers who are responsible for the education of visually handicapped students.

Moreover the government must tilt in favour of the blind in so far as education is concerned, because a blind person has only one chance in life and that is education.

In the education sector blind students are facing many stumbling blocks, among them the shortage of equipment which ranges from Perkins braille machines, paper clamps and maths teleframes and types cubes, abacuses, rulers and all elements that shape a partially sighted mathematical set. That is compass, divider protector and pencil. Given the above mentioned objects, one might be tempted to say this equipment for the visually handicapped must

be modified in braille fashion, in order to speed the growth of professional visually impaired people.

Moreover, visually impaired people are facing difficulties due to the shortage of reading books. In the case of my original place of birth, and in my own country, Zimbabwe, we only have two national libraries. These are the National Braille library for the Blind and the Dorothy Duncan library, one located in the capital city, Harare, and the other in Bulawayo. Given the fact that these libraries supply the whole country at large they fail to meet the demands of the country at large leading to poor results for visually handicapped children, hence we encourage the state to establish many libraries to avoid this plight.

Moreover, as blind students we face some difficulties due to the specialised resource teachers who earn their certificate through corruption. They transcribe our inscriptions unfairly in the sense that they have a lack of knowledge in so far as education and braille signs are concerned. Hence to avoid such stinking corruption the government should train and recruit blind teachers in order to avoid such problems.

Furthermore, in educational subjects I think visually handicapped students must always have access to practical subjects like agriculture, home management, art and crafts; this enables those who are not able to untangle teachers' lectures in their mind culminating in their success in future.

Moreover, blind students must learn typing through the use of computers and typewriters for them to enable their essays, tests

and articles to be appreciated and read by the majority population percentage of the world and to overcome their studies abroad.

Integration in schools must be encouraged. This helps blind students to associate, and to earn a good living after analysing and assessing the various characters of people that are partially sighted and visually impaired students. Interested schools also assist the visually impaired students to be assisted through reading print notes and books.

Moreover, for students to accomplish their desire and their future life, they must be provided with extra time when they sit examinations. Since their writing needs a lot of time, miles and miles of time. When they put paper and remove it, especially in Perkins braille machine.

In order to achieve their future lives, they are supposed to be awarded with enough time for them to be in a position to finish their examinations, thereby passing them and achieving their goals.

Still looking at education, visually impaired students are supposed to be provided with peer education like guidance and counselling and education for living. This moulds and shapes a good student and authentic life for blind and visually impaired students at large.

Still looking at education, visually handicapped students must be treated with the same treatment which is used on the side of those who are partially sighted. In terms of misbehaviour, which ranges from alcohol abuse, association with people of loose morals, public violence, etc., I am obliged to say I do not know what part of those people who mistreat the visually impaired is missing.

Moreover sports are another part of education. Given this fact, visually handicapped students must be offered various sports games and teachers and lecturers and the Minister of Education must encourage students to take part in sporting activities by giving them prizes, through money and even clothes. Sports are important because it refreshes one's mind. It is also important for educational activities in the sense that it provides physical fitness. Hence sports must be taken seriously.

Teachers must be taught how to work with those people who are visually impaired at school.

Furthermore, students who are visually impaired are supposed to have full knowledge of HIV and AIDS. This helps them to avoid misbehaviour, enabling students to know the effects, results and consequences of HIV and AIDS. Some students waste their time having sexual relationships and with prostitution. This is also the same case we find in blind students. Hence HIV must be known by each visually handicapped member in order to know how to avoid it.

Moreover, education is essential for the blind and those who are visually impaired because it is the centre of life skills, although a visually impaired person fails to meet his demands to be a part and parcel of white collar jobs. He also has a chance of doing some blue collar jobs like farming, weaving, trading, this is only done due to the knowledge which he obtains during his stay at school.

Moreover, in Zimbabwe we have few organisations which cater for the plight of the students, among them the National League for the Blind. We also have the Rauna Mission Fellowship which proved

and highlighted to be a failure. Surely because of mismanagement of resources and corruption which danced on the part of its leader.

Moreover, the national organisation which proves to be optimistically tilting in favour is the National League. It provides us with school fees, uniforms, pocket money, and it also has some links with the National Library for the Blind located in the King's City: Bulawayo.

Moreover, as visually impaired students we are also assisted by some district officers, who look after us with papers, Perkins, advice and also textbooks. Hence they play a pivotal role for the growth and for our school and nation, thereby shaping a good educational image for Zimbabwe.

Moreover, as students we might also want to have some trips to see some areas of interest like the Great Zimbabwe ruins, Victoria Falls and Chinho Caves. For us to travel to those areas it appears difficult, solely because blind people see by touching and feeling a certain object. Hence if the state and donors provide us with the transport, it will be for our advantage, so that we can learn many things which might assist us in our education at large.

Moreover, our families also appear to be a stumbling block which might not understand, for fathers do not help us with school fees, they do not cater for our rights. Given this situation, I ask the government to find some alternatives to avoid their misunderstanding.

In a nutshell, education is good for the visually handicapped students and, as one of the English scholars said, "Disability does not mean inability".

Julieth Munjanganja

Age: 14

My mother's language is Shong, one of the two major languages in Zimbabwe. I was born in Gutu district. I was born sighted. I grew up under the care of my parents. My sight deteriorated when I was at the age of five and was starting my Grade One.

I could hardly see what was written on the black board. I revealed the problem to my teacher who found it difficult to believe. He therefore had to carry out some tests so as to confirm my blindness. After he had pulled me right he then passed this sad message to my parents. This was a hard blow to them. Just like my teacher, they also could not believe what they were told, but with the passage of time they discovered the truth of my blindness.

This was very sad for them. I continued with my education and my sight continued decreasing. When I was in Grade Three my left eye was totally blind. My parents could very much worry since they had no means to assist me regain my sight.

The challenge was too much for them. They were completely lost in mind. The first step was to visit a prophet. There they discovered a shock of their time. They were told that this problem was caused by my grandmother. My father was dumbfounded and could not understand why his mother could do such a bad thing.

The prophet did all he could to help me regain my sight, but to no avail. The prophet had created a big problem. He gave birth to hatred between my parents and granny. My parents' endeavours did not end there. This was just a beginning.

Many people advised them to try traditional healers. Hence they agreed to try their luck and visited one. They visited a very popular healer. When we visited this traditional healer, he seemed as the prophet has put words in his mouth. He echoed the same words that my grandmother was the prime cause of the catastrophe of my blindness. The traditional healer added that granny had done it to fix me and my parents.

As a result of this revelation my parents stopped all the aid they were giving to my grandmother as a form of punishment. Again the traditional healer failed in his attempt in making me regain my sight. This was an utter discouragement for my parents. They lost all hope of ever having me receive my sight again. Since the traditional healer failed, he did not even ask payment for his attempt.

When my parents had done everything they could consulting the prophets, traditional healer and herbalist, their last resort was hospital. Hospital fees were very expensive, such that my parents had to sell cows and borrow some money from neighbours and relatives. They then took me to a private hospital to see an eye specialist doctor, he operated on the eye, but according to him it was too late. Much time had been wasted on irrelevant attempts. When this failed my mother was so depressed as she had wasted

a lot of money only for the surgery that would fail her. She had nowhere to turn. All her efforts were exhausted.

I continued at a sighted school though, but my sight was continually failing. It was really a drawback, since I could hardly see. It was better though that I continued being good at school two years along the line. My parents were advised to send me to a special school. I found myself doing Grade Five at M. Hugo Primary. Then I started with my braille lessons. They were quite interesting, especially the writing part of it. Life was becoming tolerable among the partially sighted and the totally visually impaired pupils.

It never rain but it pours. Just a week before sitting Grade Seven examinations the eye that had remained my solace blew off, so I became totally blind from then on. I cannot express how I felt. All hopes for passing Grade Seven vanished into thin air. The major problem was that I couldn't write.

Therefore just starting the exams I had somebody reading me the exam whilst answering in braille and that was a difficult time. But all the same I would bear with it. My headmaster and all the teachers found it challenging. And my mother in her ignorant state at what had happened to me far away from home. Surely that was the most trying I had heard in my life that from then on I have to live in a dark world. That year was another year for me, since my father died during the second term. Therefore the news of my total blindness had been received with my mother all alone.

It was such a difficult time for my mother when I went for the holidays that year. She could hardly take it in that I was totally blind,

bumping into things using direction and having to learn almost everything anew. I gradually accepted the state I had plunged in. I started to learn how to survive using my hands and them only. I started learning all skills depending on my hands.

Things started going smoothly at secondary school. I am at a special school, which is a sister school of where I did my primary education. At M. Hugo Secondary I first was given counselling to accept my state. I was oriented by totally blind students to the place around the school. I found them rejoicing in their situation and I happily joined it.

In the secondary school after counselling, interacting with other totally blind students, and with time healing wounds, I accepted my situation. My mobility improved gradually with time. I could use my hands and eyes as my sensory organs. This special school is wonderful. We learn practical lessons which help us to acquire skills in real life situations. We learn such subjects like agriculture and home management, where we are taught to be skillful farmers and mothers of tomorrow.

Term one ended with happy results in my new state. When I went home on holiday I became teacher of my mother and the entire community, teaching them ways and means of accommodating a totally blind person. I also showed them what I could do by myself, that which I had learnt at my new school. I surprised them in many ways as I displayed my ability in various skills.

At my new school I had been taught to move around by myself, prepare food, grow and cater for animals, mend torn clothes, fetch

water and many other useful things. At home people could see whether learning was taking place now that I was totally blind, they would ask me questions which I would answer in a very intelligent way. Since I became totally blind I am denied access to information given to other teenagers such as information about our culture, STI, HIV and AIDS and other social issues.

In my social life I found it difficult to share with others about relationships. It seems I have fears that people would be listening. I also do not have confidence in moving alone, especially in town. In such situations I would obviously need an assistant, especially in crossing road and shopping around the town. These, then, are the real problems, since it is difficult to come by people who are trustworthy. When it is windy or it is raining my ears are disturbed with the noise and it disturbs me. Another major uneasiness is shown when we are at home. It hurts that even younger children are given challenging and big tasks, whilst I am given work just to pass time, meaning it will not be challenging.

At school the partially sighted have many advantages over us. They always choose full plates with large pieces of meat, and are the same people who would access "some more". At tea we will be in a queue. The partially sighted would move back on seeing a small piece of bread and push the totally blind in front to take that piece.

Surely at times this life is bitter. At our school we have very little braille literature, hence we have to depend a lot on the partially sighted and mostly they are reluctant to assist, especially if you

happen to beat them at school, they would refuse to read you any books.

Back at home it is an embarrassment when small children close their eyes and imitate how you walk. When asked to choose clothes I would feel I would choose a bad colour if it has a nice design and tangible.

At times I feel cheated when I ask my friend to count money for me. Pregnant women may shun sitting next to me thinking that blindness can be spread to their children.

I am quite average in school. My best subjects are English, science, history and religious studies. My hobbies are reading novels and newspaper articles, playing goalball at school, watching television, listening to the radio and singing.

Receive Mutore

Age: 17

I am a boy aged 17 and I am a visually impaired boy. I am now in form 5 at Musume High, which is in Mberengwa. I come from Mutore, from the outskirts of the town, where I live with my aunt and uncle, due to my father's mental distortion.

From my teenager age I lived in Mutore with my aunt and uncle. While in Grade 2, my eyes were not functioning well because my left eye was hurt by a barbed wire which was tightly constructed. That marked a turning point in my visual impairment, since both of my eyes were affected.

I think you know how difficult it is to be looked after by an aunt, not only for the disabled, but also for the able bodied which means a very unfriendly atmosphere for me. I began to face the difficulties when I was a boy, since I was ill-treated by my aunt. She did not even give me the care which a child must be given.

Whilst my father was working the situation was better, because he was the one who used to buy some clothes for me. That was before his total mental disturbances, when he was working for the white man who was known as Whitehead.

While he was working, before my aunt and uncle took me, he used to carry me on his shoulders and go together to his working place.

That was before his total mental illness. As his illness developed, his young brother took me and began to look after me together with his wife.

My uncle loved me wholeheartedly before his wife influenced him to take me as a bad thing. The situation grew worse when I became disabled, since my aunt did not even appreciate the good works which I used to do. She just took me as a lazy boy although I was a hardworking boy and even now I am a hard worker.

One day my aunt suspected me of stealing her money. That day I spent the whole day herding cattle in the bush. She beat me thoroughly during the night when all of our neighbours fell asleep, so as not to be stopped in doing such a thing. My uncle was absent, since he was in town at work.

She tied me with a rope and started to beat me. The surprising thing was that whilst her infant was crying she went to her bedroom and as she lit the candle, she found her money. She came in the kitchen and untied me. After that, she pursued me to drink a cup of tea and I refused because I was in great pain.

The following morning, her first born son told her to ask for forgiveness from me, but she refused saying I am a disobedient child. Even if I was to tell my uncle, I failed to tell him because they were in the same boat of always taking me as a wrong person. From there I developed a pain in my left hand shoulder.

I always noticed the pain after doing a tough job. My aunt would become angry if she saw me resting. Last year I fled from the rural

areas to the town where her son worked, since he is the one who loves me. I spent the whole year with him without even going to the rural areas.

She once visited me and tried to persuade me to go back to the rural areas and help her do various works. She did that immediately after she noticed that truly I am a very important and hardworking man. I refused to go back to the rural areas, because I was living a very interesting life as compared to that one in the rural areas. I was working as a lawn cutter, and dresser of orchard trees at a certain white man's house, who lived at a nearer place.

As I was working I was preparing to continue my advanced level of education, by buying a few items to use at school. I just managed to buy a few exercise books, a bar of washing soap, a bottle of vaseline and a few things to use as a boarder student.

From that time up to now, I did not even bother myself to go back to the rural areas again. Now I am at school and my parents whom I used to stay with did not even assist me with some items which I need to use at school, but I just struggle on my own to go to school. They did not even pay school fees for me, but the school registered my name to the social welfare to pay the fees for me. Now I am learning, but the social welfare organisation is not playing its role, since our headmaster is complaining because of that.

I completed my secondary education at Margret Hugo Secondary School for the Blind, where we were learning for free. The school was developed by donors. In those days, the donors were assisting

us with everything, from clothes, food, ball point pens, exercise books, school uniforms and even shoes.

It was from 1998 up to 2006, after completing my ordinary level of education. The school really developed my life greatly, since we were taught to do everything. The proverb which says disability does not mean inability is truthful. Because there is no job which I may fail to do because of my disability.

What pained me most those days and even these days, however, was that my uncle supported the move of not supporting me, being influenced to do that by his wife, who did not even care for me.

During my years at M. Hugo School for the Blind I have discovered that his problem is faced by most of the blind students, who are facing the same problem of not being taken as human beings, since some of them spend the rest of their school holidays at school. So that's how some blind and visually impaired people were treated by both their relatives and their parents.

They are always discriminated in society so much that they will feel out of place. I also discovered that many of the disabled and blind people are talented by God, although they have a disability.

To sum up the above information, I just want to conclude by saying my life as a visually impaired teenager pained me most because of the ill treatment which was offered to me by my aunt and uncle. Now the situation is better due to the separation between me and my aunt.

Richard

Age: 15

I was born partially sighted and albino. When I was young neither my parents nor me knew that I was partially sighted. When I was young my parents used to send me to take things which were a distance, but they were ashamed because I could not see. They repeated this again and again until they discovered that I was partially sighted. It took a long time for my parents to accept that I was partially sighted, because I was the first born out of seven. As I grew up, my parents did not know what I would do in my life.

My relatives and parents had to segregate me from all other children. They had to discuss stories with all other children, not with me. When I tried to befriend other children they did not want to play with me. At leisure time at night the children in our village used to play games, but they didn't want to play with me.

Due to this segregation I understood there was something wrong with me, but because I was young I never knew exactly what it was. I had to live alone whilst others went to the fields and went to play. Later on my parents decided to take me to traditional healers and prophets so that I may be healed, but to no avail. My parents also tried all sorts of medication through doctors, but to no avail also.

Through advice from other villagers my parents came to understand my problem. When my parents understood my problem they accepted me as a member of the family. My parents also started to encourage other children to play with me and talk to me. My parents were willing to teach me some of the chores, but they did not know how to teach me. I grew up with nobody to cater for me. My parents did not teach me some things because they thought they would hurt me, so I grew up not knowing many things.

When I was seven years old I had grown enough to think, so I started to understand I was partially sighted. My father took me to a village pre-school for me to be able to read and count numbers before I went to primary school. In the pre-school I faced many challenges because some other children isolated me and they usually laughed at me. The teacher there in the pre-school did not know how to teach me, and also when others played games I had to sit alone.

Later on my parents took me to a nearby school for my primary education. At the school others would not want to be friends with me, so I faced many challenges. I had to sit alone, or at other times I had to amuse myself alone. On the way to and from school others would not like even to walk with me. When they did walk with me they also laughed at me or made fun of me.

I was not needed in the community —it continued to hurt me as other people my age did not want to play with me. Others did not want even to eat with me because they felt it would damage

their sight. Some of the students were good and kind because they played and lived near me.

I started my primary education with some difficulties in writing because the teachers there had no interest in teaching me. Sometimes I wrote things which could not be seen. I would not be able to read as the teachers wrote things on the board. I also had to sit near the board for me to see, or I had to stand near the board to see clearly. In group reading I also had difficulties: the teachers gave out one book for each group, so I could not read because there were many of us in each group, and also because I had to put my eyes near the book so as to see.

In writing tests I needed a long time to finish, or sometimes I had to guess instead of reading then writing because I could not see some colours they used properly. My results at the end of terms were not very good or pleasing to my parents because of this disability.

Some of the teachers in that school were also caring to me, while others were not. Those who were willing to care for me would want to, but sometimes they did not know how to teach me. I was also not included in practical lessons such as growing or watering vegetables because they did not know how to teach me, and sometimes they thought I couldn't do things.

When others went for sports, I had to go home because they thought I could not do anything. When we went to the grounds where there were some instructors to teach us some activities, I had to sit there whilst others did the activities, or I had to remain

in the classroom whilst others went there. When my parents saw that my results were not pleasing, they decided to take action.

At the resource centre there were better conditions than I faced in our home school. At the resource centre there was a specialist teacher who would cater for us and also teach us other things. At the resource centre there were also other students like me, so I felt a bit comforted. There were also some large print materials which would help us in reading. There were other facilities to help us in reading, for example lenses which enlarge letters. There were also people who were able to read for me, so it was far better compared to an ordinary school without resources.

I came across some problems in the resource centre. One of the problems was that some days other pupils did not want to read for me. There was also a problem in learning mathematics, because the teacher showed the work on the blackboard which I could not see. Some teachers were caring and others were not; the caring ones were able to illustrate to me the diagrams and how to work maths.

At the resource centre all the sports were done by sighted people and the practical sessions were done by sighted people also. There was also the problem that the sighted ones at the resource centre would isolate me and also they did not want to share ideas with me. Another problem was that we had very little material, so if you wanted to read in large print you had to wait until the person at the machine finished. Also, for the end-of-term tests we were given ordinary question papers which were written in

small print, so this became a problem too. The only time we were given question papers written in large print was when I sat my grade seven examinations. The results were better, but not as I was expecting, so this disability can also cause a person to fail. When I finished my primary level 1 I went to a special secondary school where I am now.

In a special school like where I am now, there are suitable conditions for a partially sighted child like me. The conditions in a special school are far better than in a sighted school or resource school, because here there is no segregation or discrimination because we are all the same. In this special school I discovered that visually impaired people can take a lot out of education, because in this school there are teachers who are blind and also there are big men and women who have learnt at this school who are lawyers, teachers, social workers and in many other jobs.

There are facilities that help us to read in large print. There are also large print books that make it easier for us to read. There are teachers who are qualified and they know how to teach us even mathematics and many other subjects. In this school we learn practical things, such as agriculture and home management, which enable us to know some of the things which we acquire both at school and home, for example in agriculture we learn how to grow vegetables, maize and even sugar cane, so it becomes easy if we are at home to acquire those skills. In home management we also learn how to cook, wash and many other things. Here I am able to take part in sports because our teachers know how to teach us these sports. My friend, here at the special school

there are many things which are better as compared to sighted and resource schools.

People in the community do not understand me as a partially sighted teenager. They think that I can not make anything out of education. People in the community do not take us as human beings like them because sometimes they think I can not even grow vegetables, cook and do many chores at home. Even boys and girls do not think that I can marry, and also they do not want to share ideas with me. When people educate teenagers about culture, and even about HIV/Aids, they do not include us, so you can see that we, as partially sighted teenagers, face many problems and segregation.

People in the village or community segregate us because we are partially sighted. They do not understand that we are just the same and we think as they think —or more than them.

I also have problems travelling back home from school. The bus conductors leave us on the way sometimes and also they want me to pay the bus fares and they ask me silly questions. Even if you have the bus fare they will leave you. Even the passengers also do not treat me properly on the way just because I am partially sighted. You can also be left behind in many activities just because you have low vision.

As a partially sighted teenager I have faced many challenges, but I know that one day I will make it.

Timothy Chirava

Age: 15

Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them. I was neither born great nor have had greatness thrust upon me. I had to achieve my own greatness. I am in form two at Waddilove High School in Marondera. I have two disabilities which are short sight and albinism.

I was born in a family of six, but as it is said that in the midst of life we are in death, we were left a family of five after my father's death. Even though I am disabled I achieved my right of name and nationality. Some blind students in Zimbabwe do not have names and homes, while some are being given curseful names, for example "Mugave", meaning a curse from god.

As I have been left with a single parent, she cannot afford everything that is needed for my survival. She is not employed and cannot buy me lotions for protection against the sun. My skin burns if subjected to extreme hotness of the sun. Sometimes I tend to be straining my eyes when reading because I do not have spectacles. I used to go to school without the basic requirements of a school pupil. This is because of the poverty in my family.

Despite the fact that I am the only disabled child in my family, my siblings have love and care for me because they know that blood

is thicker than water. To show their love and concern for me, my siblings fight for my rights whenever they see them being violated. It is only anger that caused my sister to shout at me abusively. She used to say "Musope", meaning a person without skin. This bored me to the extent that it was better to die than to live.

Long ago in Zimbabwe, children born with two disabilities used to be killed, but this has already been eradicated. My mother and siblings are offering me the right to grow and survive. This is because they know that a child is important for the future and plays a decisive role in making the world a better place.

Before my siblings knew about the right to have a voice and be heard, they used to say I had no voice to give my opinions about any issue. As soon as they became used to my identity they started listening to my requests and opinions before making decisions. The only problem I am facing in my family is health and health care. I sometimes work hard on a hot day. This will affect my eyes, and on the other hand it also affects my skin. I am sensitive to the extreme heat of the sun.

My family is impressed with the way I work. I am a hardworking child who has a right to play, because all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. I work hard both academically and manually. Sometimes my mother will not be happy to see me working hard because she thinks that she will be violating my rights. In reply, I tell her that "hard work is the key to success".

I have to be great after severe hard work in school work. I am very grateful to my family for encouraging me to work hard and

to be focussed on my school work. In addition, I would like to thank them for providing me food, clothing, a home and security which is also a right for a blind child. In Zimbabwe some tend to have no home and earn a living through begging. The only way to solve the problem of homeless people is by building homes and institutions for the blind.

I also want to thank my family for accepting me as I am and fulfilling my rights. My family have love for me, but because we are as poor as a church mouse they cannot meet and surpass my needs. Being an only disabled child in a family is also a blessing in disguise. I have lots of benefits which may include having my requests accepted quickly and not being subjected to overworking, just to mention a few.

Since I had to achieve my own greatness and have a right to go to school, my mother sent me to a school with special education for the blind. I am a former student of Jairos Jiri School for the Blind. It is a school for the blind only and had no integration. I completed my primary level when I was thirteen. I came out with five units as my grade seven results, and Jairos Jiri offered me a scholarship.

Education commences at the mother's knee, and every word spoken within the hearing of little children tends towards the formation of a character. Having grown up in a family which had love and was friendly to one another, I became friendly to my schoolmates. My social interaction with children made us become friends. Out of all the students at my school, I became a close friend of two

boys, namely Shaun and Tinotenda. These two had seen that we are all the same before the eyes of the lord. We love one another wholeheartedly because love without relief is like mustard without beef.

During my first days at Waddilove High School it was difficult for the students to accept me as I am. People stared at me as though I was a strange human being. Students were not comfortable to share resources with me. Time is the best counsellor, and with time they became used to me and I seemed normal before their eyes.

The kitchen staff at first gave me a cup and said that I could not share the same cup with those who are not disabled. This worried me mostly and I felt out of place, but what comforted me is the fact that they were ignorant of special education. They did not know that a person can be both blind and an albino.

After receiving total acceptance from the children, I wanted to prove that 'disability is not inability'. I commenced working hard, being guided by an expression which says, "Some books are to be tasted, some to be swallowed and others to be chewed and digested". This helped me to make use of every book I came across. After having tasted all the books I quoted the saying that "a good book is the precious life-blood of a master".

I became intelligent to such a degree that other students thought I was a genius, but in response I told them that "genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration". By this I meant that all my intelligence came from wide reading and hard work. I was and I am still focused on my school work because

there are no problems of paying school fees since I was given a scholarship.

I became a friend in need and in deed to almost everyone at my school. I helped my friends academically, spiritually and morally. Integration can also mean total inclusion without looking at race or disability. I am a poet and also a public speaker. I have won many prizes for public speaking, and now I can speak to a crowd or audience fluently and confidently. I was also displayed on Zimbabwean television while reciting a poem. Public speaking became my favourite hobby.

In sporting activities I am an athlete. I competed with people without disabilities and I was the best. In Zimbabwe we hold paralympic games annually where we compete in classes according to our degree of disability. There I proved that I am also an athlete and I managed to scoop many prizes and medals. I do not take disability as a hindrance to do good because I want to prove that 'disability is not inability'.

After being accepted and treated positively by the majority at Waddilove High School, there was one group left which was a group of teachers. I worked hard at school because I know that education is the leading of human souls to what is best, and making what is best out of them. Total acceptance from the teachers was also due to my hard work in school. I was very inquisitive with the teachers in order to have social interaction with them.

Being a leader is one of those tremendous responsibilities and has to be exemplary. It was the teachers who elected me as a prefect

and they did this for the sake of showing equal opportunity. This showed that I am the same as those who are not disabled and that there should be balance.

At first I thought people were not going to accept and treat me as a prefect, but it was the opposite. In a bucket-full of tomatoes there may be some bruised ones. This can also mean that even though some had already accepted me, there are some who still exploit me. They are only a few and create no harm for my survival.

On the other hand, at my school I have many advantages. Some advantages include the payment of fees. My fees are being paid by the Jairos Jiri Association. I have easy access to facilities and commodities. I also get good treatment from other students. The use of abusive words in an abomination.

It takes all sorts of people to make a community. I live in a community with both illiterate and literate people. People are ignorant of special education. They do not know much better about disability.

In my community some people thought I was bewitched to become blind and an albino. While some thought I was bewitched, others thought that my mother was a witch and I was a curse from god. This would have worried my family, but all this was not true. It may be a genetic defect which caused me to be so.

Many people in my community used to jeer at me and they gave me nicknames. Some call me 'Musope', meaning a person without skin, and some of the nicknames include 'Murungudunhu',

meaning a black-white man, 'Bofa iru', meaning 'see that blind person' and also someone who cannot see and is incapable of doing anything worthwhile, and some call me 'Mahlina', meaning a Chinese man. This at first worried me, but I know that it was because of their ignorance of special education.

We have held two activities to educate people about disability. I had to educate them both orally, for the sake of those who are illiterate, and in writing for the sake of those who can read and write. The nearer the church the further from god. To my surprise those people who lived far away from me were the first to accept my identity, while it took a long time for those near me to accept the teaching.

In the community, I met many challenges in which I stood firm in order to overcome. In some tough circumstances it needed my perseverance, while some needed help from the community. Due to the help I get from the community, I beg to differ with an expression which goes, 'laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you will weep alone'. In times of hardship the world will also be there for us.

In my community and as people had accepted me as I am, I became the happiest person in the country. I had many advantages in the community over those who are not disabled. Some of the advantages include being offered help whenever necessary, even without needing assistance, and not paying bus fares. I don't pay bus fares and for access to education facilities, just to mention a few.

On the other hand I have many disadvantages. I sometimes face little acceptance, for example a person may wash his or her hands after touching me, or may not share the same cup as me. People tend to take disability as incapacity and always want to abuse me physically or emotionally. Sometimes at my school I cannot work properly with computers because of brightness. This is a disadvantage in that I cannot enjoy myself while others do.

For every blind person to achieve his or her rights there must be awareness campaigns. These will help to warn people and make them aware about disability. They will also know our rights and learn not to violate them. There must be equal opportunities. We have to be given time and the opportunity to show our talents. Even though we are disabled, we can do worthwhile things because disability is not a barrier to doing good. There must not be anyone who looks down upon a person just because he/she is blind. Discrimination has to be abolished.

Lastly, the community has to be educated and learn to appreciate disability as natural and not a hindrance to doing good. Education is the leading of human souls to what is best and making what is best out of them. After being educated, the community will know the best way to treat us and that is why we need to do so.



Declaration

On behalf of all blind and partially sighted children in the world, we would like to evaluate the current state of affairs with regards to our situation and suggest the following recommendations in order to improve our quality of life.

No blind or partially sighted child should be excluded from equal treatment under the law on the basis of disability.

Given that most blind children do not have access to education, we recommend all individuals have the right to an education and no impairment can prevent this from occurring.

Every child has the right to remain in the family they were born; visual impairment shall not be the grounds for removal.

Every child has the right to contribute to and receive the benefit of living in a community. For this to occur improvements to include all blind children must be made.

Every child has the right to receive appropriate help from the necessary institutions and societies. No child shall be subjected to any sort of mistreatment on the basis of blindness or low vision.



Given the discrimination suffered by blind children, all children have the right not to be mistreated physically or mentally in the areas of school, home, and community.

All children should have the right to move freely within their community.

We, the blind and partially sighted children of the world, request that the governments and organizations representing our rights allocate funds for organizing events for the benefit of the children in their respective countries.

All blind children have a right to be accepted in any school and can not be discriminated based solely on their disability. There should be at least one teacher in every school with the necessary capabilities to provide an equal education opportunity for the child.

All children in the world, regardless of disability, have the right to be treated equally.

We hope that governments around the world will consider our recommendations.





The teenagers who took part in Listening to the Children, the International Congress for Blind and Partially Sighted Children, in Pontevedra, Spain, in June 2008.

'Listening to the Children' brings together testimonies offered by blind and partially sighted boys and girls from all over the world. It includes stories of happy children and sad children; communities willing to accept diversity and others that reject it; families devoted to caring for their children and meeting their needs, and also others that abandon their children because they are unable to face up to a responsibility they feel is overwhelming.

Whatever the story, here we have a compilation of different - and on many occasions even contrasting - testimonies from boys and girls, for whom this book will be a beacon of hope and just reward for a life of overcoming adversity.