

Jamaica Society for the Blind needs help

Have you ever wondered what the opportunities are for the 26,000 Jamaicans who live daily with blindness?

Those of us in Kingston who drive on Old Hope Road will have at some time or another glimpsed that marvellous quotation in elegant black script written large upon a blue wall which covers the entrance to the Jamaica Society for the Blind (JSB).

It's a quotation from Helen Keller which reads: "The worst thing is to be born sighted but to lack vision." Makes you stop and think.

Most Jamaicans who do turn blind in early adulthood, average age 41, from ill effects of either diabetes or glaucoma. This blindness is often preventable and so the European Union, Sight Savers International and the Caribbean Council for the Blind are funding a programme called Providing Sight 2020 in the Caribbean especially to provide education and outreach projects to assist in preventing blindness in Jamaica, Haiti, St Lucia and Guyana.

Two-month training session

At the Old Hope Headquarters the JSB usually teaches penmanship, Braille, typewriting and computer use, plus allows access to a large library of Braille manuscripts and audiocassettes. An especially exciting programme was that offered through a two-month training session. Robert Milton, a graduate of that class, showed me how after being trained in JAWS (Job Access With Speech) software for Windows he can now go online and access newspapers, email and use the search engine to gain information through the software which speaks to the users.

The software costs US\$1,000 for an individual to buy and is discounted for organisations which use a larger number of computers. Now blind people who have been trained like Milton can pay J\$100 per week to the JSB to assist with electricity costs and use JAWS in the JSB computer room. Milton says his life has been transformed in a revolutionary way by gaining access to the Internet.

It is estimated that only 3,000 of Jamaica's blind are being assisted by the JSB and even that is threatened now. The JSB receives approximately one-third of its operating costs from a government subvention but the rest must come from donations. Many organisations and individuals have been generous in the past. With the declining economic situation, however, donations have also declined and, over time, a debt of \$2 million has accrued. The board, under the chairmanship of Lola Marson, has taken the decision that it must now come to grips with the situation and clear the accumulated debt no matter what, so that the JSB can restructure and resume activities with a clean slate.

Unfortunately many donor agencies will fund projects but not salaries. Drastic times call for drastic measures and to this end seven of the 11 members of staff have been laid off to save the cost of their salaries until the debt is cleared. They may even have to sell some assets. These controversial measures have not gone down well with everyone in the blind community but as Harris explains: "The Jamaica Society for the Blind is experiencing challenging times so we're trying to clear off the debt to continue providing service."

If you want to help, donations can be made to: The Jamaica Society for the Blind, 1111/2 Old Hope Road, Kingston 6.

Tel: 876-927-3760, 927-6758-9 Email: jsb@cwjamaica.com

In the USA, tax-free donations may be made to The American Friends of Jamaica (designate the donation to be directed to The Jamaica Society for the Blind), 850 7th Avenue, Suite 1106, New York, NY 10019, Tel: 212 626 6883, Email: afjexecutivedirector@gmail.com