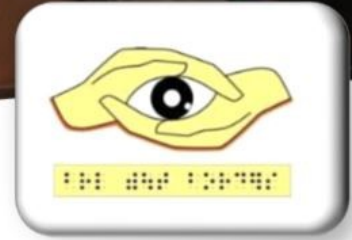


Braille Without Borders

Quarterly Newsletter 4 -2017



Dear Friends and Supporters,

2017 was a difficult year for Braille Without Borders in Tibet. But now, towards the end of the year, it seems that all the challenges might hold some unexpected positive opportunities.

But first a brief overview:

For the past 19 years, Paul Kronenberg and I, together with our Tibetan colleagues and later our former students, have set up and ran the preparatory school and our farm for blind children, adolescents and adults. In addition to the preparatory school in Lhasa, which prepares children between the ages of five and 15 for integration into the regular school system, it also includes a Braille Book Printing Press that produces Tibetan, Chinese and English textbooks, a vocational training farm where blind adolescents and adults receive training in agriculture professions, handicrafts and music, as well as the unique self-integration program.

Following the successful integration of four blind students in a regular school in 2003, this last program has grown at a rapidly. It now includes seven regular schools of various levels and even two universities in Lhasa and Chengdu. More than 120 blind children and adolescents are currently integrated without special help, they integrate themselves. For this they were intensively prepared at the BWB school. In addition to blind techniques, such as mobility training and practical life skills, they learnt how to use a computer; they learnt reading and writing Braille in three different languages; Tibetan, Chinese and English. The main asset however is their confidence that helps them to solve problems independently. With this acquired self-confidence they are not only less dependent on help, but now also can help their sighted classmates.

We were always aware that the contract between us and the local partner, the Tibet Disabled Person's Federation, would end in 2017. Therefore, we prepared early to transfer the responsibilities to our employees, in particular to our former students Nyima Wangdu and Gombo Gyendsen, and to Adron, who manages the training farm. And that worked well. All programs ran like clockwork. Braille Without Borders with all its new concepts was widely recognized throughout China and the world. That's why we were shocked when last summer, during our handover visit, we were told that our counterpart wanted to shut down the entire facility and transfer the children from our programs to the local 'special schools'.

We and many people around the world were speechless. What was behind the closure of such a well-functioning and forward-looking project? Also the national Chinese Disabled Persons Federation had no explanation. As a result, local and international speculations have developed, which I have addressed in the media and in letters. To protect the successful self-integration program, diplomats have teamed up at the highest level and talked with representatives of the Chinese Disability Authority.

Although the Chinese Disabled Persons Federation repeatedly mentioned, as a national body, they cannot and don't want to interfere with the affairs of the autonomous region of Tibet, a lot has happened in the Tibetan region that we are still hopeful for a continuation of the program.

It seems that the city of Shigatze is interested in taking over the training farm including our colleagues and trainees. Similarly, the city of Lhasa now seems to be interested in taking over the preparatory primary school. Gyendsen sounds hopeful: "We are all still here, the children are taught as before".

Whatever happens, Braille Without Borders and the self-integration process lives on. Many initiatives launched by blind kanthari graduates have adopted our concepts and adapted them to local conditions. This results in similar projects with the self-integration concepts in Asia and Africa.

What is sure is that we can no longer physically work in Tibet and therefore we decided to transfer the experience and knowledge gained in Tibet to India. On a property a bit North of Trivandrum, we are planning a new Braille Without Borders School to prepare blind children for self-integration. It will be a combination of our training farm and the Lhasa project. In this new school, children are intensively trained in blind techniques and languages, skill training, sports activities, environmental training and agriculture. In short everything that is required for self-integration with the goal of a fulfilled and happy life in a (still rather) blind-unfriendly society.

We will keep you up to date on developments in both Tibet and India.
We are grateful for your help by sharing this newsletter with interested people in your network.
On behalf of all our students and colleagues, we say THANK YOU very much for your continued support to improve the lives of blind children and youth!

Wishing you all the very best for the year 2018.
paul and sabriye



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