

VISIONS

Canadian Council of the Blind Newsletter

June 2019

“A lack of sight is
not a lack of vision”



President's Message++



Following a great deal of work by members across Canada as well as many other groups of persons with disabilities we have a lot to celebrate and that is the passage of Bill C-81. Now we are waiting for Royal Assent for the Bill to become the Accessible Canada Act. This is indeed a momentous time in history for Canadians which should make us all PROUD CANADIANS. Thank you to all who worked to make this

possible and most especially our Person of the Year Hon. Carla Qualtrough. Our work doesn't stop here it really only begins! Our next steps are in the preparation of the Regulations that need to be laid out. CCB along with many others have already started this process toward an accessible Canada. This whole process will make life so much easier in many ways well into the future.

CCB has been busy with other business as well over the past month. As a member of the Women's' Committee for WBU we met in May to review results of the survey on barriers for women to become leaders. As there were well over 700 responses and many, many barriers we will now begin to assess what can be done to ease the barriers well into the next quadrennial.



As we are learning we are facing barriers in the struggle to ensure Canadians in some provinces are receiving the "Best medicine in the right time". As some provincial health plans continue to use "off label" medications as a cost saving method at the potential increase in other eye conditions. CCB continues to work to improve this situation. Also, CCB is working with other organizations in regard to the usage of biosimilar medications for similar reasons.

In the upcoming months we will continue working on these issues to help to improve the quality of life for those living with blindness and the prevention of blindness.

Many chapters will be winding down for the summer so enjoy the season.

Louise Gillis, National President

A yellow rectangular banner with two pencils on the left side. The word "Announcements" is written in a large, black, sans-serif font across the center of the banner.

Announcements

CCB's 42nd Atlantic Sports & Recreation Weekend, May 17-19, 2019++:



The 42nd Atlantic Sports & Recreation weekend was hosted by the CCB Prince County chapter in Summerside, Prince Edward Island on May 17-19, 2019. There were participants from New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island with 43 participants and 17 guides & drivers.

We had a 75th Anniversary cake following the CCB Idol show.

It was the first time for Carolyn Landry to attend the weekend and she won a second place medal in cribbage, Thelma Blanchard received a medal for high single in chute bowling, John Powers also got a medal for high single bowling. First place team bowling was five men from Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

Unfortunately, we had to cancel the discus, javelin, shot put and horseshoes due to the weather as it was not safe for the participants.

Thanks to all the volunteers who help made our weekend a success.

Assistive Technology

Getting the Job Done with Assistive Technology: It May Be Easier Than You Think ++:

I remember getting my first computer back in the early 90s almost like it was yesterday. A friend of mine was receiving regular treatments from a massage therapist who happened to be blind. My friend mentioned that this gentleman used a computer with a screen reader. I was vaguely aware that this technology existed, but I never really considered using a computer myself until that first conversation I had with my friend. I began doing some research, and eventually purchased my first computer with a screen reader and one program included. I'm sure there were a few other programs on that computer, but WordPerfect is the only one I recall today.



The vendor from whom I purchased the computer came to my home, helped me get the computer up and running, and gave me about a half-hour of training on how to use the thing. A few books from what is now Learning Ally as well as the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped along with some really late nights were what truly started me on my journey.



I eventually became aware of a whole community of blind people who used assistive technology. They all had their preferred screen reader, and most people used only one. Screen readers cost a lot of money and hardware-based speech synthesizers increased the cost of owning assistive tech. Unless the user was willing to learn how to write configuration files that made their screen reader work with specific programs they wanted or needed to use, it was important to find out what computer software worked best with one's chosen screen reader.

I eventually outgrew that first screen reader, and spent money to switch to others as I learned about them. I have no idea how much money I spent on technology in those early years, and that is probably for the best!

Fast forward 25 years or so, and the landscape is totally different. I have a primary desktop PC and a couple laptop computers all running Windows 10.

I have one paid screen reader—JAWS for Windows from Vispero —and I use two free screen-reading solutions—NVDA, from NVAccess and Microsoft's built-in screen reader called Narrator.



I also have a MacBook Pro running the latest version of Apple's Mac operating system that comes with the free VoiceOver screen reader built in.

I have access to my wife's iPad if I need to use it, and I own an iPhone 8 Plus. These devices also run VoiceOver. Finally, I own a BrailleNote Touch Plus, HumanWare's Android-based notetaker designed especially for the blind.

Gone are the days when I must limit myself to only one screen reader and one program to get a task accomplished. If a website isn't behaving well using JAWS and Google's Chrome browser, I might try the same site using the Firefox browser. If I don't like the way



JAWS is presenting text to me on that website, maybe I'll switch to NVDA. If the desktop version of a website is too cluttered for my liking, I'll often try the mobile version using either Safari on my iPhone, or Chrome on my BrailleNote Touch.

The lines between desktop application and Internet site have blurred to the point that I honestly don't think about it much anymore. It is often possible to use either a computer or a mobile device to conduct banking and purchase goods.

So what makes all this added flexibility and increased choice possible, anyway? In many cases, the actual hardware in use is less expensive than it used to be, although admittedly products such as the BrailleNote Touch are still on the high end of the price spectrum. Along with the availability of more screen readers and magnification solutions than ever before, the cost of most of these solutions has come down greatly. Even companies like Vispero that still sell a screen reader that can cost over a thousand dollars if purchased outright are now offering software-as-a-service options that allow you to pay a yearly fee that provides the latest version of their software complete with updates for as long as you keep your subscription active.

While some may not consider free options such as NVDA or Narrator to be as powerful and flexible as JAWS, they will be perfectly adequate for other people who aren't using a computer on the job complete with specialized software that requires customized screen reader applications to make it work properly.



Rather than throwing up their hands in frustration and venting on social media about how sighted developers don't care about the needs of blind people, many in the blind community are respectfully reaching out to developers, educating them about the needs of those who use assistive technology, and giving them well-deserved recognition on social media when they produce a product that is usable by

blind and sighted people alike. Also, companies like Microsoft and Apple work to ensure that their screen readers work with the company's own including Safari and Microsoft Edge.

You may be someone who is currently comfortable using only one screen reader with one web browser and just a few recommended programs on your computer.

You may be thinking that everything you have just read in this article sounds great, but you may be wondering how to actually apply any of it in your life. First, I would say that if you are happy with your current technology then don't feel intimidated by someone else who uses other solutions.

That said,

I would urge you to keep your screen reading technology up to date as far as is possible. Also, make sure that you are using an Internet browser that is fully supported by the websites you frequently visit. This will ensure that your experience is as fulfilling as it should be. For example, though Microsoft Internet Explorer has been a recommended browser for many years for those using screen access technology due to its accessibility, it is

no longer receiving feature updates from Microsoft, and therefore many modern websites will not display properly when viewed using it.

If you think you would like to try new applications and possibly different assistive technology solutions but you don't know where to start, keep reading.



Back when I first started using a computer, I knew of very few resources to which I could turn in order to gain skills in using assistive technology. Today, there are many ebooks, tutorials, webinars, podcasts, and even paid individual training services available for anyone who wishes to expand their knowledge of computers and the like. One excellent resource that has been referenced many times in past issues of AccessWorld is Mystic Access, where you can obtain almost every kind of training mentioned in the previous sentences. Another resource you may recognize is the National Braille Press, which has published many books that provide guidance on using various types of technology. Books from National Braille Press can generally be purchased in both braille or in electronic formats.

There are also many online communities of people with vision loss who use a specific technology. Two of the most well-known are AppleVis for users of iOS devices and the Eyes-Free Google Group for users of the Android platform. Both communities are places where new and longtime users of these platforms can go to find assistance getting started with the technology or for help troubleshooting issues they may encounter.

While I vividly recall my first experiences as a novice computer user, it is almost impossible for me to imagine actually going back to those days. Today, the landscape is rich and the possibilities are endless for anyone who wishes to join their sighted counterparts in using today's technology. While there are still many hurdles to jump, I am confident that things will only continue to improve as we move forward.

So fear not, intrepid adventurer. Let's explore this exciting world together. In the meantime, happy computing!

By Jamie Pauls

If you would like some help entering the world of computing, or expanding your knowledge you can contact the CCB Get Together with Technology program. You can call the office 1-877304-0968, or email gtt@ccbnational.net.

Voice Dream Scanner: A New Kind of OCR++



There is a new player in the optical character recognition (OCR) space, and it comes from an old friend: Winston Chen, the developer of Voice Dream Reader and Voice Dream Writer. In this article we'll start out with a brief conversation with Chen. Then we'll take a look at the developer's latest offering: Voice Dream Scanner. Spoiler alert—it will probably be the best \$5.99 you'll ever spend on a text recognition app!

Those who use their phones to audibly read e-Pub books, PDFs or Bookshare titles are likely already familiar with Voice Dream Reader. It works so well with VoiceOver and TalkBack, it's hard to believe it wasn't developed specifically for the access market. But according to Chen, "I just wanted to build a pocket reader I could use to store all my books and files so I could listen to them on the go.

No one was more surprised than me when I began receiving feedback from dyslexic and blind users describing how helpful Voice Dream Reader was for their needs and making some simple suggestions to improve the app's accessibility."

Chen's second offering, Voice Dream Writer, was also directed at the mainstream market. "Sometimes it's easier to proofread your document by listening to it instead of simply rereading the text," says Chen.

At the time, Apple's VoiceOver cut and paste features and other block text manipulation capabilities were, shall we say, not quite what they are today? The innovative way Chen handled these functions made Voice Dream Writer equally useful to users with visual impairments.



Reinventing the OCR Engine

"I've been wanting to add OCR to Voice Dream Reader for a few years now," says Chen. "It would be useful for reading protected PDF's and handouts and memos from school and work."

The hurdle Chen kept encountering was finding a useable OCR engine.

"There are some free, open source engines, but they don't work well enough for my purposes," he says. "The ones that do work well are quite expensive, either as a one-time license purchase with each app sold or with ongoing pay-by-the-use options. Either of these would have raised the price I have to charge too much for my value proposition."

Last year, however, Chen began experimenting with Apple's artificial intelligence (AI), called Vision Framework, that's built into the latest iOS versions, along with Google's Tesseract, TensorFlow Lite, and ML Kit.

"Instead of using a single standard OCR engine, I combined the best aspects of each of these freely available tools, and I was pleasantly surprised by the results."

Instead of making OCR a Voice Dream Reader feature, Chen decided to incorporate his discovery into a separate app called Voice Dream Scanner.

“I considered turning it into an in-app purchase, only there are a lot of schools that use Reader and they aren’t allowed to make in-app purchases,” he says. As to why he didn’t simply make it a new Reader feature, he smiles, “I do have a family to feed.”



Chen has been careful to integrate the new Voice Dream Scanner functionality into VD Reader, however. For example, if you load a protected PDF file into the app and open it, the Documents tab now offers a recognition feature. You can now also add to your Voice Dream Reader Library not only from Dropbox, Google Drive, and other sources, including Bookshare, but using your device’s camera as well.

To take advantage of this integration you’ll need both Voice Dream Reader and Voice Dream Scanner. Both can be purchased from the iOS App Store. VD Reader is also available for Android, but currently VD Scanner is iOS only.

Of course you don’t have to have VD Reader to enjoy the benefits of the new Voice Dream Scanner.

The app installs quickly and easily, and displays with the icon name “Scanner” on your iOS device. Aim the camera toward a page of text. The app displays a real-time video image preview which is also the “Capture Image” button. Double tap this button, the camera clicks, and the image is converted to text almost immediately. You are placed on the “Play” button, give a quick double tap and the text is spoken using either a purchased VD Reader voice or your chosen iOS voice.

Note: You can instruct Scanner to speak recognized text automatically in the Settings Menu.

From the very first beta version of this app I tested, I was amazed by the speed and accuracy of the recognition. The app is amazingly forgiving as far as camera position and lighting. Envelopes read the return addresses, postmarks and addresses. Entire pages of text voiced without a single mistake. Scanner even did an excellent job with a bag of potato chips, even after it was crumpled and uncrumpled several times. Despite the fact there is no OCR engine to download, and the recognition is done locally, a network connection is not required. I used the app with equal success even with Airplane mode turned on.



After each scan you are offered the choice to swipe left once to reach the Discard button, twice to reach the Save button. Note: the VoiceOver two-finger scrub gesture also deletes the current text.

Scanner does not save your work automatically. You have the choice to save it as a text file, a PDF, or to send it directly to Voice Dream Reader. You probably wouldn't send a single page to Reader, but the app comes with a batch mode. Use this mode to scan several pages at once and then save them together: perfect for that 10-page print report your boss dropped on your desk, or maybe the short story a creative writing classmate passed out for review.

Other Scanner features of interest to those with visual impairments are edge detection and a beta version of auto capture.

Edge detection plays a tone that grows increasingly steady until all four edges are visible, at which time it becomes a solid tone.

Auto-capture does just that, but since the AI currently detects any number of squares where there is no text this feature is only available in beta.

However, if you're using a scanner stand it will move along quite nicely, nearly as fast as you can rearrange the pages.

You can also import an image to be recognized. Unfortunately, as of now, this feature is limited to pictures in your photo library. There is currently no

way to send an e-mail or file image to Scanner. Look for this to change in an upcoming version.



The benefits of Voice Dream Scanner are by no means limited to the blindness community. Chen developed the app to be used as a pocket player for documents and other printed material he wishes to scan and keep. Low vision users can do the same, then use either iOS magnification or another text-magnification app to review documents.

It doesn't matter in which direction the material is scanned. Even upside-down documents are saved right-side up. Performance is improved by the "Image Enhancement" feature, which attempts to locate the edges of scanned documents and save them more or less as pages.

The Bottom Line

I never thought I'd see the day when I would move KNFB-Reader off my iPhone's Home screen. Microsoft's Seeing AI gave it a good run for its money and until now I kept them both on my Home screen. But I have now moved KNFB-Reader to a back screen and given that honored spot to Voice Dream Scanner.

Most of my phone scanning is done when I sort through the mail. Seeing AI's "Short Text" feature does a decent job helping me sort out which envelopes to keep and which to toss into my hardware recycle bin. But Scanner is just as accurate as any OCR-engine based app, and so quick, the confirmation announcement of the Play button often voices after the scanned document has begun to read.

This is the initial release. Chen himself says there is still work to be done. "Column recognition is not yet what I hope it will be," he says. "I'd also like to improve auto-capture and maybe offer users the choice to use the volume buttons to initiate a scan.

Stay tuned.
By Bill Holton

In the News

WE DID IT! ++

Bill C-81, the #AccessibleCanada Act has passed in the House of Commons with unanimous support. Final step, Royal Assent!

Canada's first accessibility bill could become law next month, Minister says ++:

The federal government will heed the calls of Canada's disabled community and amend the country's first piece of national accessibility legislation to include some of the changes they sought, the minister spearheading the effort said.



Accessibility Minister Carla Qualtrough said the government will be adopting all the amendments the Senate introduced to Bill C-81, also known as the Accessible Canada Act, when it comes back before the House.

Earlier this month, the upper chamber's committee on social affairs, science and technology amended the proposed act to include a handful of measures disability advocacy organizations across the country said were necessary to make the bill more effective.

Ms. Qualtrough conceded that the government had initially resisted some of their most pressing calls, such as the demand to include a timeline that would require the bill to be fully implemented by 2040.



But Ms. Qualtrough said the legislation, which was drafted after cross-country consultations with disabled individuals and advocacy groups, needed to reflect the will of the people it's meant to serve.

"It's just paying tribute to all the work and all the people that have been here in the past 40, 50 years really insisting that disability rights are human rights," Ms. Qualtrough said in a telephone interview.

Activists had been crusading for Canadian accessibility legislation for decades and watched as other countries, including the United States, got laws on their books.

The Liberals began making good on an election promise to deliver a Canadian version when they tabled the Accessible Canada Act last June, pledging \$290-million over six years toward its implementation.

The act's stated purpose is to "identify, remove and prevent" accessibility barriers in areas that fall under federal jurisdiction. This includes built environments, federally run programs and services, banking, telecommunications and transportation that crosses provincial lines.

Barrier, as defined by the act, includes anything "architectural, physical, technological or attitudinal" that "hinders the full participation in society of a person with a physical, mental, intellectual, learning, communication or sensory impairment."

Disabled Canadians reacted with wary optimism when the draft act was first tabled, but soon began voicing concerns that it was too weak to make a difference in their lives.

Last year an open letter signed by 95 organizations, including the Canadian Council of the Blind, Canadian National Institute for the Blind, National Network for Mental Health and March of Dimes Canada, raised a number of measures they said the act must include to be effective.



Chief among their concerns was the bill's unwillingness to include a timeline for implementation, as well as its failure to name various forms of sign language as official languages of deaf Canadians.

The Senate's social affairs committee, citing community concerns, amended the bill to address those issues. Ms. Qualtrough said their proposed amendments will now be incorporated into the bill, which will come before Parliament for final debate next week and could be officially passed into law by the end of June.

The government, Ms. Qualtrough said, has already begun work to appoint the people who will be tasked with implementing and enforcing the bill.

A Chief Accessibility Officer will oversee the implementation of the legislation across all sectors, while a new Accessibility Commissioner will be responsible for compliance. A new Canadian Accessibility Standards Development Organization, comprised largely of people with a broad spectrum of disabilities, will also be put in place.



“Canadians deserve this,” Ms. Qualtrough said. “We deserve a system that helps us move beyond the way we currently talk about disability, and I think this will do that.”

Activists celebrated the inclusion of the Senate’s amendments, saying they help to strengthen the bill in some key areas.

“This is an important victory,” accessibility activist David Lepofsky said in a statement. “While the Senate’s amendments don’t fix all the deficiencies with Bill C-81 ... they are an important and helpful step forward.”

Many community members said they remain concerned about other areas the Senate did not address when making revisions to the act.

The open letter criticized the bill for granting the government broad powers to exempt people from the new rules, spreading enforcement over numerous agencies, and opting not to withhold federal funding from organizations that don’t comply with accessibility measures.

Advocates also raised concerns about the way the bill was written. The bill repeatedly uses “may” rather than “shall” or “must” when describing initiatives, meaning the government is empowered to take actions but never required to follow through on them, they argued. An amendment brought before the committee addressed that concern but was defeated.

“That’s one of the areas we’re going to be watching very closely,” said Kerri Joffe, staff lawyer with the Arch Disability Law Centre. “This government may be acting quite quickly to implement some of the accessibility requirements, but there’s nothing to assure us that future governments will.”

Donna Jodhan, president of advocacy group Barrier-Free Canada, said community members will work to raise awareness of C-81 once it becomes law. While she believes the bill will need to be strengthened further in the coming years, she said the presence of Canadian federal accessibility law represents an important milestone in and of itself.

“We’re one step closer,” she said.
“And we can’t wait.”

By MICHELLE MCQUIGGE



Montreal Researchers create Audible Hockey Puck for Visually Impaired Players++:

A team of Montreal university researchers has developed an audible hockey puck they say could revolutionize the sport for blind players.

For years, visually impaired hockey players have used a tomato juice can or a steel container filled with small balls as a puck.

The improvised devices work, but players have trouble finding them on the ice when they stop moving and become silent.

Three years ago, Gilles Ouellet, a blind hockey player and employee of L'Université du Québec à Montréal, came up with the idea for a puck that makes a continuous sound.

Now, he and a team of researchers have created a prototype consisting of a shock-absorbent plastic shell with a battery-powered circuit board inside.

A series of sensors analyzes puck movement and transmits the data to a buzzer, which can be adjusted to a maximum level of 120 decibels - about equivalent to a chainsaw or a thunderclap.

"It's going to make the game faster and more interesting," Mr. Ouellet said. "And because the puck makes noise when it's in the air, it'll help goalies make more saves."



Steve Vezeau, one of the researchers behind the project, said the team initially thought it would take six months to develop - but then they realized how hostile the hockey environment can be.

"There is the question of impact, but also the cold and humidity," Mr. Vezeau said.

Players went through up to five tomato juice boxes a game, while the steel can last about two games. Mr. Vezeau said the sonorous puck has a lifespan of about three games.

Mr. Vezeau and Mr. Ouellet are hoping the puck, known as BIPeR, helps to increase the sport's popularity.

There are about 400 people in North America who play in blind hockey leagues.

The next step is to find a partner that could help the research team scale their product. The prototype was financed in part by USA Hockey.

Sidney Crosby is only Cole Harbour's second-best hockey story ++



1 Kelly Serbu

This is the story of Kelly Serbu, who noticed some issues with his eyes in his second year of junior hockey and kept right on playing -even as he went blind.

...story continues from the May edition.

With a lot of support from the CNIB, Serbu turned around his academic life. He left academic probation in his wake and managed not only to graduate but also on time with his class. He put in applications for graduate studies and received letters of acceptance from teachers college and Dalhousie's law school on the same day. Without much deliberation, he opted for the latter with the idea of becoming a criminal lawyer. "I knew in that sort of practice I could work for myself and that was really important to me," he says.

Law school is a heavy workload, but Serbu was undaunted and even matter-of-fact about the challenges ahead. "The extra hours you have to put in [with sight loss] are a pain in the ass but really it was easy once I made that decision," he says. "Once you're focused, things get easier. If you're doing something you really want to do, you don't mind the work."

Just as he wanted to be a hockey player and not the blind hockey player, so too did Serbu want to be a lawyer and not the blind lawyer. Just as he wanted no special considerations in the arena, he wanted to blend in when he walked into court. He more than pulled off that goal. A few Halifax police officers who were cross-examined by Serbu didn't put it together that he had any sort of vision loss, at least the first few times they testified in trials he worked.

The same goes for presiding judges. Serbu wasn't above theatrics — sometimes when questioning a witness he'd take a dramatic pause while “referring” to notes he couldn't see. Mostly, though, he just passes for sighted; any signs of his vision loss being so inconspicuous as to be non-existent. Said Serbu's friend Josh Arnold, a judge on the Nova Scotia Supreme Court: “One lawyer I

know was standing in the courthouse waiting to be called and saw Kelly through the crowd and waved — I'd introduced him to Kelly before and they had crossed paths a few times over the years. The next time I saw this lawyer he said, ‘Your friend there is pretty stuck up.’ I had to



tell him that Kelly was blind. [The other lawyer] just didn't know what to say. Kelly's as far as you can get from [stuck up]. He's the most social and positive guy you can find. The next time they were in the courthouse, of course, Kelly picks him out by the sound of his voice and strikes up a conversation with him.”

Through law school and in the years of his practice, Serbu didn't completely hang up his skates — when time constraints allowed, he played “gentlemen's hockey” as they're wont to call it in the Maritimes right alongside sighted players. He also coached the Auburn High School team for one season; and, when he married and had kids, he coached their teams in the Cole Harbour Minor Hockey Association for eight years. A little more than 10 years ago, Serbu's legal career took a sharp turn. The secretariat overseeing claims made to the Indian Residential Schools Agreement was looking for an adjudicator, a lawyer to assess the cases of Indigenous Canadians who were separated from their families and endured trauma and abuse in the residential-school system. The job had an emotional draw for Serbu — his father is Romanian, his mother Métis. Since 2008, Serbu's practice has been mostly dedicated to assessing claims in settled class actions, first with the Indian Residential Schools Agreement, then with the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children and currently with women who were

harassed and wrongfully denied opportunities as RCMP officers. The work has taken him across Canada and to many remote communities — it's given him a chance to engage in a bit of hockey tourism, visiting rinks where Jonathan Cheechoo skated in Moose Factory and Chris Pronger took the ice in Dryden. And with so much of the case load tied to federal government settlements, Serbu moved his practice, at least for a time, from Halifax to Ottawa.



It seemed like Serbu's remaining ties to hockey would be as a fan and recreational player, and that his second trip to the Centennial Cup with the Mooseheads would represent the endpoint of his competitive career. But in the summer of 2015, Serbu got a call from Peter Parsons, a blind athlete in Halifax.

"It was really out of the blue, but Peter asked me if it would be okay if he put me in touch with Matt Morrow, the executive director of the national blind hockey association," Serbu says. "I didn't even know that there was anything like that out there. That led to me meeting with Matt when I was out in Vancouver for a hearing. We were having a few beers and they were explaining what blind hockey is — how teams are balanced, no unfair advantages with one team being more sighted than the other. They told me how they wanted to build a national program and push the development of international teams, to get status in the Winter Paralympics. I had no idea all this was going on. Then at the end of the night, they said: 'You know what ... we think you're going to be the best blind hockey player in the world.'"

'IT WAS HOCKEY'

It's safe to say that back in the early '90s Kelly Serbu was the best legally blind hockey player in the world and, to that point, the only one to play for a national Jr. A championship. But in March 2016, he was one of more than a couple dozen legally blind players on the ice at the Mattamy Athletic Centre, the former Maple Leaf Gardens. The game they played that day was unlike any in that building's history: featuring a hollow steel puck, five-and-a-half inches wide, containing eight ball-bearings that make a distinct rattle; nets three feet high to

encourage players to keep the puck down, so that it can be more easily tracked aurally; players wearing the helmets that designate by colour their categories of vision loss, so officials can ensure competitive balance. If the pace of the game was slower than a rec-league session, the biggest factor was not skating ability but rather the puck, which is designed to allow players to find and track it with limited sight.



2 Kelly Serbu's blind hockey team

While Matt Morrow had tried to give Serbu a good idea of what to expect at the select series, he was still taken off-guard. "I knew there'd be some guys who struggled to skate but others could play," he says. "And it was hockey, really so competitive. I was getting banged around, guys hitting you 'accidentally on purpose.'"

"He knows that with all he's done in his life he can be a great role model for anyone in the blind community. And he's comfortable doing that."

You might presume that you'd have trouble rounding up enough legally blind players to get a pick-up game going, but there's a much deeper pool than you likely know. According to the CNIB, 500,000 Canadians are either blind or partially sighted — a community as large as Halifax and Regina combined. Further, more than five million Canadians have eye diseases and conditions that put them at significant risk of vision loss or blindness. All of this is to say that odds were pretty good Serbu wasn't the only person in the



3 Two teams from a Blind Hockey Tournament in Halifax

country who played in bantam and midget at AA or AAA before losing their sight. As it turned out, he isn't even the only one at Canadian Blind Hockey's select camps who played junior while legally blind.

Serbu paid his way to Toronto and arrived in game shape — he hits the gym and the treadmill hard and plays weekly games with sighted players. Was he the best player at the first selection series? Maybe. He has worn the 'C' when Canadian teams have played teams of American blind players the last couple of years, but he'll admit that he wasn't the most skilled player on the ice when the select series returned to Toronto's Mattamy Centre in March.

"This farm kid from Alberta has come out the last two years and he's the future of the program," Serbu says. "He had Stargardt just like me and played Jr. B while he was already legally blind. The difference is that he was an offensive guy with a great stick, whereas I played my role."

This kid, Jason Yuha, is in fact 27 and he's a business school grad from the University of Alberta, not a hayseed by any stretch. Yuha was diagnosed with Stargardt when he was six years old — his older sister has the condition as well, so physicians were on the lookout early — and he grew up skating on a flooded sheet on the family farm in Rosalind, Alta. He played baseball and basketball while in grade school but by high school his

vision loss made him drop those sports and concentrate on hockey. Yuha wound up playing a couple of seasons with the Killam Jr. B Wheat Kings. In fact, he was a centre and among the leading scorers on the team. Yuha's not so quietly competitive with Serbu, taking a jab about him "being 47, really getting up there." But he also recognizes Serbu's role not just as a leader for the Canadian Blind Hockey team but as a champion of the game and sports for the blind.

"Kelly has the gift of gab and great social skills," Yuha says. "He knows that with all he's done in his life he can be a great role model, not just for the team but for anyone in the blind community. And he's comfortable doing that."



Back when Kelly Serbu was in college and skating in the Centennial Cup, he had a secret he wanted to keep. And once it got out, he was reluctant to have it turn him into a story. After all, if someone told you a legally blind player is fighting tough guys and scoring goals in a national championship tournament, you wouldn't have to be a hardened skeptic to think: I'll believe it when I see it.

The message that Serbu's imparting to teammates in Canadian Blind Hockey's program: If you can't always see it, you have to believe.

By Gare Joyce



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