

# Blind Citizens News Special Edition – 50th Anniversary 2025

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Blind Citizens Australia is the National representative organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired.  Our purpose is to inform, connect, and empower Australians who are blind or vision impaired and the broader community.

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### Blind Citizens Australia Contact Details

Ross House  
Level 3, 247-251 Flinders Lane  
Melbourne VIC 3000

Telephone (03) 9654 1400  
Toll Free 1800 033 660  
SMS 0436 446 780

Email [bca@bca.org.au](mailto:bca@bca.org.au)Website [www.bca.org.au](http://www.bca.org.au)

Facebook [www.facebook.com/BlindCitizensAustralia](file:///C:/Users/kathryn%20collins/Documents/JOBS/BC0042_BCA_templates%20CONTRACT/completed/4.%20docs%20of%20template/www.facebook.com/BlindCitizensAustralia)  
Twitter @au\_BCA

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## Editorial – by Lynne Davis, Carmel Jolley and Amy Curran

Welcome to this special anniversary issue celebrating 50 years since the formation of the National Federation of Blind Citizens (NFBC) in June 1975. From the very beginning, it was recognised that access to information was of paramount importance to our community. We have included David Blyth’s introduction to the first issue of our newsletter in September 1976 in which this point was emphasised. Communication has been a strength of our organisation. Early issues of the newsletter were typed over the kitchen table and then laboriously transcribed into various formats. Our production process is no longer so labour intensive, but the newsletter still depends for its strength on the contributions of our members.

This issue contains a mixture of articles written especially for the 50th anniversary (mainly tracing changes over 5 decades), and articles reprinted from our earlier publications. As editors, we took a deep dive into Blind Citizens News and its predecessors, NFBC Newsletter and BUFF, and discovered many gems there. Only a few could be included in this issue, but we hope to be able to make our transcribed publications available on the BCA website. Our sincere thanks to Susan Thompson, who spent many hours with Amy Curran transcribing her braille copies of BUFF, Carmel Jolley also spent long periods converting inaccessible files into screen reader friendly documents, as well as going down some intriguing rabbit holes! You will find some of these articles here.

Even before 1975, Hugh Jeffrey, one of our founding members, had written a charter for the blind of the world (reprinted here), which later became the template for the World Blind Union. Our organisation has always had an internationalist approach, and you will find examples of this in a number of reprinted articles as well as a review of some major moments written by Ben Clare.

The work which led up to the formation of the NFBC was spearheaded by a committee of 5 people: David Blyth, Hugh Jeffrey, Phyllis Gration, John Machin and Bill Jolley. Bill, whose memory after 50 years is amazing, has written the ‘origin story’ for this issue, and there is a reprint of an article by David Blyth outlining the organisations of people who are blind in Australia prior to the formation of NFBC.

Times have changed since 1975 and so have the lives of people who are blind as well as the way our organisation - now called Blind Citizens Australia - works. Susan Thompson has described changes in technologies which have affected her life, and Fiona Woods has vividly described the changes in the lives of women who are blind, while questioning whether they have been as profound as changes for women in general.

At the conclusion of this issue, we hear from some of the voices which have yet to feel fully included in our community.

Our thanks to the people who made suggestions about what might be included in this anniversary review, and to those who accepted our invitation to contribute to it. Curating this issue has been an amazing journey into the past, an obsession, a source of wonder and frustration, and most of all a huge effort in collaboration. We really hope you find the contents as absorbing as we did.

## Why a Mag for Blind People – by David Blyth

Reprinted from NFBC newsletter, September 1976

We who are blind have little or no magazine space devoted to our particular needs or aspirations. Civilization demands that information is readily communicable between its many component parts for it to survive. Blind people in the past have suffered because we lack this communication amongst ourselves. The National Federation of Blind Citizens is therefore totally committed to the principle of communication between its members. Therefore, in this, the first issue of our magazine, much of the items have been produced by the editors and a few of the members, but the future issues must contain items from blind people at large.

So let us look ahead to the near future when the major problem facing the editors will be what to leave out. Let me now thank the committee who have worked hard to produce this magazine and carry forth the principle of communication between us all.

## A Charter for the Blind of the World

Hugh Jeffrey was a key contributor to the writing of the Charter which was adopted by the International Federation of the Blind in 1969.

Reprinted from BUFF, 12,1, 1988.

The International Federation of the Blind assembled in its first Convention at Colombo, 1st - 4th October 1969, and would remind governments, agencies for the blind and all who work with or for blind people, professionally or in a voluntary capacity that:

1. All who are blind are not blind people who happen to be citizens, but citizens who happen to be blind.
2. All rights under the United Nations Charter of Human Rights apply equally to those citizens who happen to be blind.
3. Blind people, like any group in society, want to think, speak and act for themselves. Representatives of organisations of blind people must be recognised as the authentic voice of blind people speaking for themselves.
4. Governments should accept some responsibility for the prevention of blindness and guarantee to all blind citizens adequate, accepted living standards within the nation and aim to provide them with the means for a fuller life within their community through the provision of employment opportunities for those who can take them and social service benefits for all who need them.
5. Blind people would have the opportunity for travel-training with the cane, guide-dog or any other travel aide of their choice, and the right to move freely in the world without undue restraint, except that which law formally imposes on all citizens.
6. Governments should accept responsibility and make adequate provision for the basic needs of blind citizens at least equal to those provided for sighted citizens and, where necessary, make supplementary provisions to aim to give parity with sighted citizens in preschool services, education, vocational training, employment, rehabilitation, library services, and text books, whether braille, large-print or on tape, problems of the aged, and in general welfare.
7. No blind person shall be denied training, employment, advancement or equal rights of superannuation in government or private employment - professional, commercial, clerical, industrial or agricultural, on grounds of his blindness. He must be regarded for abilities possessed; never disregarded for disabilities apparent. Employment is always based on what a man can do; never based on what he cannot do.
8. Though the charity-based system in many countries has brought some benefits to blind people, its total effects have been more detrimental than official. It has resulted in the damaging effect of highly emotional appeals to the public in the race to raise more money than others. The impression of helplessness often conveyed undermines the right and the desire of blind people for first-class citizenship, and their image of independence and competence. It now seems accepted in many countries that governments should provide for the basic needs of all citizens. The function of charitable or voluntary organisations for the blind should supplement these services where necessary or desirable.
9. The sole purpose for the existence of organisations for the blind, and for which they raise their funds, is to provide services to blind people. Therefore:
   1. The constitutions of all service organisations for the blind, whether government or voluntary, should provide for adequate numbers of representatives, elected by blind people themselves, on the governing bodies of such organisations. Organisations of the blind should be consulted in an advisory capacity before decisions are taken on policies pertaining to their welfare. This ensures them some say in the spending of money raised in their names and also ensures that it will be used for things which they want and not for things which others think they need. These are rights and must never be construed as privileges.
   2. More blind people of ability should be equipped and encouraged by organisations engaged in blind welfare to seek high administrative posts in these organisations. This could provide more scope for blind people of ability, cut administrative costs because more of the money raised for blind people would be used in their employment, could bring a closer specialised knowledge to bare on the problems involved and provide further demonstration to employers and the public of faith and confidence in the competence of blind people.
10. It is recognised that the seeking and receiving of their rights as citizens by blind people involves acceptance of the responsibilities which citizenship confers and demands. Blind people accept their responsibilities as citizens in the community and ask only for equal opportunity to shoulder their full responsibilities in civic and industrial life and to experience the satisfaction which comes through service to the community, according to their individual abilities, in a voluntary capacity.

## A History of Australia’s National Organisations of the Blind – by David Blyth

Reprinted from Blind Citizens News, March 2003

In 1911, for the first time, a meeting was held between three Australian organisations of the blind. They were the Association for the Advancement of the Blind (based in Victoria), the Association of Blind Citizens of New South Wales, and the Queensland Musical Literary and Self Aid Society of the Blind. Each organisation was established by blind people and in 1911, all were controlled by an exclusively blind membership.

At the meeting the organisations agreed to lobby the Commonwealth Government to accept blindness as a form of invalidity for income support purposes. At that time there were only two pensions available to Australians, the Aged and the Invalid pensions, and blindness was not accepted as a qualification for disability support. In 1912, following the organisations’ representations to the Commonwealth Government on this issue, legislation was introduced to allow people to qualify for the Invalid Pension on the basis of blindness. The pension is now known as the Disability Support Pension (Blind).

The 1911 meeting was responsible for guaranteeing income support for blind people and as such holds a special place in our history.

It is interesting to note that only one of the three pioneering organisations has remained as an organisation of the blind.

The Association of Blind Citizens of New South Wales is the only one that has remained an organisation of the blind, and it still does great work with its members.

### Establishing a national voice for blind people

Following the meeting in 1911, many unsuccessful attempts were made to hold a meeting of all Australian blindness organisations. These mostly failed because of the distances and costs involved.

In the 1940s the Australian Federation of Organisations of the Blind (AFOB) was formed. Its membership included the Queensland Musical Literary and Self Aid Society of the Blind, the Association of Blind Citizens New South Wales, the Tasmanian Association of the Blind and the Blind Workers Unions from Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. In the early 1960’s the Australian Guild of Business and Professional Blind joined. The AFOB was a federation of organisations and did not allow for individual membership.

The AFOB was the organisation responsible for single-handedly, and with bitter opposition from many of the blindness agencies in Australia at the time, campaigning to have the means test removed from invalid pensioners who were blind. This was introduced in 1954. The AFOB’s special place in the history of services to blind people also reflects that it was the first organisation to really attack the deplorable conditions of blind workers in the various states’ workshops, supporting those who were struggling for better conditions.

The AFOB changed its name to the Australian Federation of Blind Citizens (AFBC) in 1968. The AFBC dissolved several years after the National Federation of Blind Citizens (NFBC) came into being in 1975. The differences between the two Federations were that the AFOB and AFBC were solely made up of unions and professional groups - most blind people were not members of any of their affiliates - whereas the NFBC was a membership-based organisation which allowed for individual membership as well as for branches and special groups.

The NFBC has changed its name twice, the last being to its present name: Blind Citizens Australia. Blind Citizens Australia, the national organisation of blind people, has built on the foundations developed by its predecessors. We have branches in each state of Australia and special members from most groups affiliated with blindness.

Many of the privileges enjoyed today are directly attributable to the dedicated men and women who worked tirelessly, without remuneration, in the AFOB to gain a rightful place for blind people within the community. They were often attacked by the blindness agencies of the day but stood steadfast and in the end were successful. Blind Citizens Australia has now assumed that mantle. So long as there are blind people who are being disadvantaged or discriminated against, there will always be a need for a strong, dedicated and resourceful organisation of blind people.

## BCA at 50: How and Why it all Began – by Bill Jolley

1975 was an historic year of change and progress. The Whitlam government was in its third year of social and economic reform; it was the United Nations International Year of Women; and blind leaders inspired by the adoption of *A Charter for the Blind of the World* by the newly formed International Federation of the Blind yearned for a new world order of service delivery and citizenship.

For some prominent members of the blind community in Melbourne there was both dissatisfaction with the Australian Federation of Blind Citizens (AFBC) and alarm over the recent formation of the Australian Council for the Advancement of Blind People in Sydney (ACABP). The AFBC was becoming seen as ineffectual due in part to perceived state-based parochialism, and the ACABP was seen as too radical.

The AFBC had enjoyed a proud history of advocacy for blind people. It was an organisation of organisations - the blind workers unions based in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, the Association of Blind Citizens based in Sydney and the Australian Guild of Business and Professional Blind based in Melbourne. But it was becoming tired with dissatisfaction growing as there was no scope for all blind people to join a national organisation as individuals by right. So, people like David Blyth, Hugh Jeffrey, and Phyllis Gration (all prominent in the Guild) were looking for reform - outside the AFBC if necessary. After Serge Bankowski returned from an ACABP meeting in Sydney, he shared the news with his workmate John Machin (prominent in the Blind Workers Union in Victoria) and they decided to have a chat with David Blyth. So, the two threads were interwoven and the realisation that the time was ripe for action towards a new organisation was spawned.

In November 1974, a public meeting was convened in Melbourne which formed the genesis of Blind Citizens Australia. It approved in principle that Australia should have a national organisation of blind people that all individuals could join by right. It appointed a working party to develop proposals for consideration at another public meeting set for 10 March 1975 at Kooyong. Members of the working party were David Blyth, Hugh Jeffrey, Phyllis Gration, John Machin, and me.

The March meeting agreed to form an organisation to be known as *National Federation of Blind Citizens* that any blind person could join by right; and decided that the organisation’s first national convention should be held in June to adopt a constitution, elect a governing committee, and approve policy resolutions. The national aspiration based on individual membership without regard for state boarders was critically important in shaping the structure of any new organisation.

That first convention held in June 1975 was attended by 40 participants, about 90% of whom were from Melbourne; and, following adoption of the constitution, the NFBC was off and running as an individual member-based self-help organisation with an annual membership fee of $3. The constitution provided for branch voting at conventions, but the organisation’s first pragmatic decision was that individual voting at conventions would be retained until there were 25 active branches. That first convention passed more than 30 resolutions, many being routine for the time for such an organisation to have on its books - one dealt with the blind pension, and another dealt with audible signals for railway crossings and traffic lights.

BCA’s first president was David Blyth and the other members of the first Committee (all from Melbourne) were Hugh Jeffrey, Vice President, Bill Jolley, Secretary, Phyllis Gration, Treasurer, and Allan Bates, John Machin and Peter Sumner as Committee members. A further 89 people have since served on our governing body.

In 1976, Cecil McIlwraith and Max Mcinnerney (both from Sydney) resigned from the ACABP (which by that time was floundering) and were appointed to the Committee, and shortly after Joan Ledermann, Wal Bolin and Graeme Innes joined the Committee, further strengthening our presence in Sydney.

BCA’s growth was steady, but our acceptance and sustainability were by no means assured. We had quickly expanded into Sydney, but interstate parochialism otherwise remained. I still hear the words of Dolly Lee from Adelaide ringing in my ears: “You’ll be welcomed in South Australia but wait until you’re asked.” Sustainability was a challenge, for there were no government grants, there was more resentment than partnership from the blindness service delivery organisations, and income was insufficient to support a national member-based organisation whose communication costs were magnified by the need for braille, cassette, and large print. An early grant of $500 from the Villa Maria Society was encouraging, but the hand-to-mouth existence remained taxing. It took twenty years to achieve reliable income streams.

Two icons of the organisation in its formative years were Hugh Jeffrey and David Blyth.

Hugh was a stalwart of self-help by people with disabilities - a music teacher by profession and a gentleman by nature. He was an exemplary role model for young blind people. He was our first internationalist, taking a leading role in drafting *A Charter for the Blind of the World*, adopted by the *International Federation of the Blind* at Colombo in 1969. It has the stamp of Hugh’s philosophy and has heavily influenced BCA’s core beliefs.

Hugh Jeffrey’s lasting contribution to BCA is *The Jeffrey Blyth Foundation* which he founded with David Blyth and fostered through a generous bequest of more than $300,000. He walked the walk of commitment and self-help through which BCA’s effectiveness, longevity and independence will be assured.

David Blyth had an entirely different style. A product of the rural working-class in Northern Australia, he is a big-picture pragmatist, and was President of many organisations, but BCA has remained his life-long passion. David was elected President of the World Blind Union for a four-year term from 1992, the first Australian to occupy this prestigious position.

The strong partnership and deep friendship between David Blyth and Hugh Jeffrey were a great example for me, with their contrasting cut-around or cut-through approaches which had one thing in common - what’s good for blind people is paramount, and what BCA believes, says and does must always be directed to that end.

David was our first President for seven years from 1975, serving another three-year term from 2007 when a governance crisis called for an experienced hand to steady the ship.

So, looking back at where we’ve come from, how we’ve got there, and where we are now: I believe that one can be very glad that BCA got started, grateful to the many people who have carried the burden of leadership and proud of the organisation’s many achievements.

## Evolution or Leapfrogging? A Personal Technology Retrospective – by Susan Thompson

A 50th anniversary edition of Blind Citizens News would not be complete without a reflection on how changes in technology have impacted our lives both as blind and vision impaired individuals and as an organisation. I invite you all to take a trip down memory lane with me. Depending on where your memory starts from, you may be awed by not only how far we’ve come, but how quickly we have got this far.

In 1975, when the National Federation of Blind Citizens (NFBC) was founded, I was still in high school. I grew up on braille which had to be produced by hand with a Perkins Brailler. If copies were needed for multiple students, it was copied using a thermoform machine which melted a sheet of plastic paper and vacuum sucked the melted plastic over the braille dots – one laborious page at a time before binding into the many volumes that a hard copy braille book becomes, even today.

I learned to touch type on a manual typewriter which stamped print letters onto paper via a metal leaver hammering each letter into a ribbon.

If you wanted to write a letter to a sighted friend, you either had to type straight from your head, and mistakes or loosing track would mean winding in a new sheet of paper and starting all over again. Alternatively, brailling by hand first and laboriously typing from the braille copy.

When I was young in the 60s, Using the telephone meant lifting the receiver and winding a lever on the front surface to reach a human operator and asking for a 3-digit number. Later, telephones progressed to putting your finger into a numbered hole in a dial and rotating it in a clockwise direction. If you were not lucky enough to have a phone at home, you had to go to a public phone box (a human-sized cabinet on the street with a phone) to make a call.

I remember as I began to lose vision in my teens, having to learn to fold each note in different ways to manage money, and having to be very disciplined about doing it lest I lose track of things. By the time I had left school I had a bank note measurer to help identify the width of the paper notes, but these measures were made by hand and were very big in some wallets. Although the paper notes did respond well to being folded in different ways identifying notes from change independently could be difficult.

I played braille games and had braille watches and alarms but don’t recall many other gadgets - manual or otherwise - which helped with daily living as a blind person.

I fondly remember that I did recreational reading with a Mark 4 Talking book machine which played back recorded books on an 8-track cartridge about the size of a video cassette.

The most exciting thing I remember in very early high school was the advent of the cassette recorder, which very quickly began to replace reel-to-reel tape for daily individual use, although it was limited in recording time. However, communication by cassette lasted as a very popular way for blind and vision impaired people to keep in touch over many years.

Other than that communication, if you wanted to be involved in things with others, you had to travel for face-to-face contact. When I started to move around the world a little by the mid-70s, a white cane and whatever orientation and mobility skills I had been taught were all I had other than an occasional audio/tactile pedestrian signal.

In the early days of BCA, much of this was reflected in the way we worked as an organisation. Meetings – whether those of branches, conventions, National Council or those held with government or community organisations for advocacy purposes - were held face-to-face, with people often having to make long and expensive trips to get there. In the very early days, nearly all our organisation’s formal or business meetings were recorded for drafting of minutes which were then typed, brailed, thermoform copied, and recorded as necessary - largely by the voluntary efforts of members, their families and friends.

As the late 70s merged into the 80s, the microchip and computer revolution was underway. We began to see word processors and then computers in workplaces, and very soon personal computers in people’s homes. Importantly, we saw this progress influencing innovations which had many benefits for people who were blind or vision impaired both for personal independence, education and employment.

In relation to specific blindness devices, it was the beginnings of speech technology and software, as well as refreshable braille displays. I personally saw and used some of these early devices. Even back then I felt they were beginning to liberate me from the information access constraints of my blindness. In addition, By the later 80s and early 90s, progress in mainstream technologies had begun to have a positive impact. The beginnings of mobile phone technology, scanners and Optical Character Recognition (OCR), to name a few, had a significant role in improving communications and information access.

In the mid-80s I had the talking typewriter in my job, and because I had the money from having started working, I latched onto devices like the keynote and used it to access my newly acquired blue-chip personal computer which I could hardly lift onto the desk.

As I write this article, I can again relive that sense of liberation and excitement of something revolutionary. I developed computer skills and instincts that have served me well to this day, learned to do word processing (earlier than many sighted peers), and felt I had some real tools to improve my job options. Together with the emergence of affirmative action and Equal Employment Opportunity principles, this new technology and the skills to use it helped me do just that.

Taking a huge leap forward in time and technology, I am truly amazed to look at where things are now both for people who are blind or vision impaired and for how BCA can operate today. Mobile phones, the great improvements in internet speed and availability, the portability of computers and the servers that hold the documents and other data for the running of the organisation, and the great improvements in both hard copy braille production and refreshable braille mean we can do so much more to function as a national organisation.

We have our computer server in one part of the country and have had staff working from as many as 4 different states accessing this remotely. Many meetings can be run and attended quickly from anywhere thanks to Zoom and Teams on laptops or mobile phones.

Perhaps the most astonishing transformation that has happened began with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way BCA has been able to harness Zoom (even for those unable to access computers) to continue and improve business as usual. Most important for all of us, has been the almost overnight growth in the peer support opportunities over Zoom that were initiated in early lockdowns which are still growing today.

Looking back over these 5 decades, for me there is one big standout in the impact of technology on my life. That is mobile phones and the original basic components of calling and texting. Previously, just finding someone at a particular location or in a noisy crowded environment could be incredibly difficult and stressful. Thanks to the simplicity of just carrying a phone I am now able to talk and compare landmarks and find I am as close as the other side of a street to my friend, or we are together in the same noisy, large, crowded room. This has largely removed that stress from my life.

For BCA as an organisation established by and for members, the running of the organisation has benefited from the whole gamut of technological advances, but broadband internet and the connecting benefits of Zoom and Teams take my prize for continually improving the core business of information provision, peer support and advocacy expressed in modern language as “Inform, Connect and Empower”.

## ‘Don’t be too polite, girls’: Women in BCA and beyond – by Fiona Woods

These are my personal reflections on this topic, with information gleaned from podcasts and conversations with other women. Although we can all name many wonderful women who have played a role in BCA, very little evidence of their work remains. I found pride and inspiration in the recording of a pilot radio program made by Diana Braun and myself in 1996, called “Women: The Same, Only Different”. Female readers, please, record your lives or speak to the women you know and write down their thoughts and experiences. The wisdom and peer support I have received from these women is the essence of BCA for me.

In 1975, International Women’s Year, I started in grade 5 at a private girls’ school in Melbourne - one of the first students to be integrated in primary school. At that time, most people strove to be normal. Having a disability was not normal. To avoid being seen as a charity case, the imperative was to fit in as much as possible by adapting to meet society’s expectations. It was essential to always dress and act appropriately. Fashion rules were rigid, such as what colours could be worn together, or which outfits were required for particular occasions. God help you if your bra strap or petticoat was visible or your socks didn’t match. Any sign of blood meant mortification. As a young blind woman, I should accept help whenever it was offered, listen respectfully, mostly to men, and not be too strident about my needs. Employers and strangers could ask anything they wanted to know about marital status or disability. Most people were grateful for the services blindness agencies offered and had little say in what that was. Self-expression or complaining was a brave choice and was viewed with suspicion.

Like many young blind women, I was eager to be perceived as attractive. I relied on others to help me learn to use make-up and to choose my clothes. Whatever information was available about sex or contraception was difficult to obtain, because you had to call the braille library to ask for it. Cassette mailers bore the name of their title externally. I awoke to feminism when I started university. It challenged my beliefs about myself and my future. It taught us that women could do everything that men could do, with little worth placed on traditional roles. Feminism did not make allowances, and it certainly did not address the concerns of women with disability.

BCA’s first committee included Phyllis Gration AM as Treasurer. BCA’s third President, from 1986 to 1990, was Joan Ledermann. While some women held leadership roles, others were busy typing up and recording minutes, providing meals and hosting billets and taking care of children and households while policies were debated and written. Although often devalued because they were seen as women’s work, these roles were essential to the development and success of BCA. For me and others, these women were an inspirational source of peer support.

During the 1980s, some BCA members felt that women’s issues, such as healthcare, abuse, and lack of opportunity, were not being adequately addressed by our national organisation. Drawing on the example of New Zealand, a conference was held in Sydney in the early 1990s. Following this, BCA established the National Women’s (Special Interest) Branch (NWB). BCA council, staff and the NWB worked together on issues such as accessible labelling on contraceptive pills and information about breast screening and domestic violence. Parenting became a regular topic of discussions and articles, including a compilation of experiences in the NWB’s book “Kids are Fun for Everyone”. NWB held informative and capacity building events and workshops at each convention, often struggling to have these timetabled favourably, and with the aim of making them safe spaces for feminine-identifying people. Scholarships and workshops were organised to mentor young women leaders. NWB has consistently reported on its many activities in BC News and Member Updates. Its Diana Braun Aspirations Award is given to a woman who contributes to her community and displays leadership and strength of character. BCA has thrived under the leadership of women, but on our board and NPC women are currently in the minority. We must never be complacent about female participation in our organisation. It enriches all of us.

There have been some changes for women who are blind or vision impaired in the last 50 years. Women can now theoretically receive the same education as men and more of them enter university. I could not find gender-specific data about the unacceptably high rate of unemployment for people who are blind or vision impaired. Access to specialised blindness services has increased in some ways through the internet, but only 37% of NDIS participants are female. Their lower participation impacts women’s access to technology and many other supports. While we now understand the concept of intersectionality, there is no doubt that these improvements are not enjoyed universally or equitably.

I wonder about a blind schoolgirl in 2025. Does she feel that she belongs? Does she know that there is no ‘normal’? Does she have blind female role models excelling in many fields? Does she feel that she can be whoever she is, with blindness as significant a part of her identity as she chooses? If our girl grows up and becomes a mother, will it be treated as miraculous that she can care for her child, and will her children be congratulated on taking such good care of her? Will she have the psychological support to thrive as a woman with a disability in a world that is not designed by or for her?

I hope she finds her community in BCA.

Things have changed for women since 1975, but for women who are blind or vision impaired, I suspect they have not changed as much as they have for other women. Let’s hope the schoolgirls of 2025 don’t feel the same in 50 years’ time.

## Personal Perspectives on the WBU Young Women’s Forum – by Jodie Holdback and Jordie Howell

Reprinted from Blind Citizens News, December 2000

Meeting people, socialising, diving into hard women's issues - and no dirty dishes or nappies for a week! All this was nothing compared to the experience and inspiration that we found at the second World Blind Women's Forum.

As participants in BCA's young women's project, sponsored by the National Women's Branch, we were able to experience our first international conference. The prospect of meeting all the 12 women involved in the project, and other women from around Australia and the world, was an exciting prelude to the inspiration and friendships that we developed.

One of the highlights of the project was learning about networking and other strategies and then using them effectively in situations such as the conference. So, network we did! A whole new world opened for us. It was overwhelming but inspirational to learn about the issues that confront vision impaired and blind women in third world countries, compared to our own society. We listened to many speeches on various issues in and around these countries, which compelled us to meet women from these countries and find out more about them.

We spent a lot of time asking questions and talking to women (mainly from Africa) and felt very humble with the knowledge of how privileged we are in Australian society. It was very inspiring to hear the speeches and to talk to women who have established themselves, through perseverance and hard work, in positions of leadership.

The forum overall has made us more aware of various issues surrounding vision impaired and blind women and presented us with the challenge to be involved in helping to change things in those countries in need.

## BCA Advocacy: A Global Perspective – by Ben Clare

What better time than the auspicious occasion of BCA's 50th anniversary to pause and reflect on the great success of the association in the disability advocacy space, both within Australia and globally?

Focusing on our work internationally, we've been involved in everything from assisting neighbouring countries to establish and support robust blindness advocacy groups to being at the forefront of Marrakesh Treaty formation, negotiation and implementation, and everything in between. Our efforts in this work have been and continue to be spearheaded by dedicated and extremely hardworking individuals who totally believe in equality for all blind people around the world, improved access to services, education and adherence to human rights as spelled out in such instruments as the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD.) BCA recognises the value of partnerships, equal in nature and that are mutually beneficial, and this has been demonstrated widely over the years.

Our work at BCA predates the current incarnation of the World Blind Union and we were there right from the start with BCA members assuming leadership positions within the WBU and disability advocacy in general. Major players in the international space have included Bill Jolley, David Blyth and Maryanne Diamond (both of whom became President of the WBU).

Also very active in the international space has been the highly successful author, lawyer and advocate, Professor Ron McCallum AO, who, amongst a multitude of impressive achievements is somewhat of an architect of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD,) contributing content to the instrument and overseeing its implementation and oversight through chairing committees and being the official UN rapporteur.

The following are a few of the highlights of activities and successes over the years:

* Australia hosted the WBU General Assembly in Melbourne in November 2000. It was preceded by an international blind women’s forum.
* After the Assembly Maryanne Diamond became chair of the WBU women’s committee which developed a mentoring and leadership kit for blind women which was translated into several languages.
* BCA led some international projects which were run in Fiji and Vietnam, the Vietnamese project focussed on braille literacy for women.
* BCA supported the DAISY consortium.
* June 2013 the Marrakesh Treaty to facilitate access to published works for persons who are blind, vision impaired or otherwise print disabled was adopted.

This leadership in the international advocacy space continues today with ongoing commitment from BCA to work with likeminded organisations around the world, including WBU. Regionally, BCA is a member of the Pacific Disability Forum, represented by our current Vice President, Helen Freris, with ongoing input from the BCA membership.

BCA is proud of its contribution to international advocacy efforts, perhaps symbolised by the creation of the David Blyth Award, bestowed biennially in recognition of David’s work in BCA and the WBU.

## Tribute to Ivan Molloy

Extract from New Horizons, November 2022.

Ivan Molloy was presented with the David Blyth Award in 2005 for his many contributions to the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired in Australia and internationally. With his wife, Lorraine, Ivan led the Overseas Cultural branch of BCA until its closure in 2016.

In 1981, Ivan led a group of 16 to Sri Lanka where he had already developed close connections with the local blind community. This tour, which incorporated blind cricket, swish (blind table tennis) and many opportunities to experience the local culture, formed the basis for Ivan’s long running commitment to supporting blind people in Sri Lanka and in other Asian countries. Ivan worked tirelessly to provide financial support and material aid to the Ratmalana School for the Blind and to similar organisations. Much of this work was undertaken through BCA’s Overseas Cultural branch. The branch’s major project over many years was to cut to size and package paper that was provided by the then photo processing company, Kodak, for use as braille paper. To accommodate this work, Ivan gave over the workshop at his Mount Martha home and had his driveway reinforced to accommodate the heavy vehicles that delivered the paper as weighty rolls.

## Braille Literacy in Vietnam – by Bill Jolley

Reprinted from Blind Citizens News, September 1997

NFBCA's involvement in Vietnam started in 1993 with funding of the Thai Binh Blind Women's Literacy project, which last year was supplemented by a small project in Long An. Long An is a very poor district west of Ho Chi Minh City, still suffering in the aftermath of the war.

Last November, we received funding of $168,000 for a three-year project to run residential train-the-trainer courses in four separate provinces - two in North Vietnam and two in Central Vietnam. In a formal sense, the funding from AusAID is provided to the ACROD which has the necessary credentials as a development aid agency. I express appreciation to Helen McAuley from ACROD who has given us much assistance and who accompanied me on the trip to Vietnam last December. A requirement of the project is that we make two visits from Australia to Vietnam each year, so the next visit is scheduled for the end of June.

Each of the four teacher training courses will run for 9 to 12 months, plus another 6 months for monitoring, and will provide basic training for 20 to 25 women, about 60% of whom are blind or have low vision. In Vietnam there is an emphasis on literacy through braille, plus the teaching of some vocational skills, orientation and mobility, and health and nutrition. We hope, in the future, to introduce some basic low vision assessment and elementary low vision techniques that will benefit many people.

We have a liaison officer in Vietnam, Miss Phuong, and she has been very helpful as our translator and as my sighted guide. She interprets for us when we are in Vietnam and makes any necessary travel arrangements. Working in Vietnam is professionally challenging but personally enriching. For me it has been a privilege.

## Other Voices

In the five decades since 1975 there have been many changes in Australian society. Some of these have already been referred to in earlier articles in this issue – in particular, technological changes, and changes in attitudes towards women. The development of a human rights framework for social policies has had a significant impact on both official and everyday language, and this is clear in reading some of the older reprinted material. In general, the ideas of diversity and inclusion have been increasingly incorporated into the mainstream language of social policy, and this has been reflected in the daily realities of life in Australia, including the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired.

But within our own community have all voices been heard equally? We have included below several articles which suggest that the answer to this question has not always been ‘yes’.

From the very early days of our organisation there were many efforts to raise the issues of dual sensory loss and to support the recognition of deafblindness as a disability in its own right (which has now been achieved). The article by Di Hartmann, published in 2002, argued that few of our members were familiar with the needs of people who are deafblind, and outlined these needs in detail.

In 2003, Amanda Tink wrote an article about the efforts of some people who are blind or vision impaired to gain recognition and respect for blind people of diverse sexuality, and to form a special interest branch to give voice to their concerns. In a footnote Amanda notes that this has not happened.

Pari Srikanteshwara has written from the perspective of a woman from a minority culture, outlining her experience of the intersection between disability and cultural difference in Australia. Pari is hopeful about working within BCA to raise awareness of this intersection and develop appropriate policies which reflect the multicultural nature of Australian society.

In our searches through 50 years of BCA newsletters we found almost complete silence regarding indigenous Australians who are blind or vision impaired. This is a significant voice from which little has been heard directly in our publications, and we hope that in our anniversary year this void will be filled.

## Blind Out and Proud – by Amanda Tink

Reprinted from Blind Citizens News, March 2003.

If you're one of those people who believes that BCA is stuck back in the middle of last century somewhere - completely out of touch with the needs of its members and only interested in the easy issues - think again: BCA recently took its first step in the journey of tackling issues relevant to blind people of diverse sexuality through the creation of a special-interest group, Blind Out and Proud (BOP).

BOP is a committee of 7 people, working on issues that are relevant to blind people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. These include everything from the lack of material on diverse sexuality issues in accessible formats, to the homophobia blind people of diverse sexuality experience within BCA, and the blind community generally.

Obviously, getting information in accessible formats is an issue that affects all blind people. We know it's not new and expect our needs will fit right in with those of a similar nature which BCA pursues on a regular basis. Homophobia, however, is an incredibly complex problem which, despite the fact that it predates getting information in accessible formats in terms of being a serious issue in desperate need of attention, has never been addressed before within BCA. We commend BCA for acknowledging that homophobia exists within the organisation and for being committed to working towards its elimination. One way in which BOP hopes to achieve this is by holding a session at this year's national convention, where a panel of blind people of diverse sexuality will discuss issues that have affected them personally. The session will include plenty of time for questions and discussion.

Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks and appreciation. Firstly, to Sean Tyrell for acknowledging the importance of issues relevant to blind people of diverse sexuality when I brought them up at the Youth Consultative Forum late last year; taking those issues to the National Policy and Development Council's face-to-face meeting in November and getting the 7 of us in touch with each other to form BOP. Secondly, we would like to thank the National Policy and Development Council suggestion that the group be established, and for their support generally. Finally, we would like to thank the many people who have expressed their support for BOP and the rights of blind people of diverse sexuality either through Blind Citizens Australia’s e-mail discussion list in response to others' hostility, or to one of us individually, or just by reading to this point in this article. Your open-mindedness and co-operation are very much appreciated.

### Amanda’s 2025 footnote

At the 2003 BCA convention, a panel session on the theme of difference and diversity was held. It featured speakers from various cultural and identity groups. As a part of this panel, a representative of Blind Out and Proud presented an excellent and entertaining speech about their experience growing up in both the blindness and LGBTIQA+ communities. The convention also passed a resolution to play an active part in supporting blind people from other minority groups. Soon after that BOP began working on becoming a special interest branch of BCA. We sent the proposal including by-laws to BCA a number of times but did not receive a response.

## Are all voices heard? Blindness and cultural difference in Australia – by Parimala Srikanteshwara

As a woman from a diverse culture, I acquired vision loss in mid adulthood because of a road traffic accident. Initially I couldn’t identify myself as disabled and let others know my difficulties. This was due to the fear of being rejected and isolated by my own community, which believes disability/chronic illnesses as the result of past actions. The stigma associated with disability, specifically for women with disability, is much greater and often women are left neglected without treatment.

This occurred with me as well when I was told the rest of my life is useless and dependent on informal care. I was not allowed to express my health concerns as they were dismissed saying it is all common and that I should be thankful for being alive. I wasn’t given any rehabilitation, nor was I connected to peer support which would have provided me the much-required hope to sail through the sudden vision loss and disfigurement.

Presently, I face barriers in accessing culturally appropriate supports. In my culture, women are not comfortable in discussing health concerns, particularly women’s health issues, in front of men. But at times hospital staff and specialists are loud in asking my symptoms before male interns. In other instances, my health problems are not seen as impacting my daily life more severely due to my disability and advice is given which is hard to be performed by myself without support. I am asked to chart my fluid intake and bladder diary, which is hard for me due to vision impairment and memory issues.

In these challenging times, I learnt about BCA’s Women’s Branch. There I feel connected and can express myself safely. I hope to become involved in BCA’s future endeavours of engaging with multicultural women from different backgrounds. I look forward to taking a part in creating cultural awareness within the vision impaired community.

## Deafblind Issues – by Di Hartmann

Reprinted from Blind Citizens News, June 2002

Reading a recent issue of Blind Citizens News, I noticed that at the 2001 Convention a resolution was passed by BCA members, supporting the Australian Deafblind Council (ADBC) in its fight to have ‘Deafblindness’ recognised as a single condition by Federal and State Governments and Agencies.

It occurred to me that whilst there was merit in one disability supporting another, many of the members of BCA would know little, if anything, about deafblindness, or had in fact, never met a person who was deafblind.

Just as the blind community has a division of those who are totally blind, and those who are vision impaired, the deafblind community also has two divisions. People who are profoundly deaf, who use Auslan for communication, and are legally blind consider themselves as ‘deafblind’ (DB). Auslan is the official language of the signing deaf in Australia. Those people who wear hearing aids or are hard of hearing and legally blind, usually describe themselves as ‘vision hearing impaired’ (VHI).

I am aware that there are people in the blind community who have a hearing loss, whether it be from an ageing process, genetic condition or from an accident, who may not relate to the term ‘deafblind’. As blindness is often their primary sensory loss, these people tend to relate mostly to blindness issues and culture. It is when both conditions are almost equally debilitating that there is a need to understand why deafblindness should be seen as a separate disability for other people to fully understand the specific needs of this very isolated group of people.

I have been involved with the deafblind community for the past twelve years due to my own dual sensory loss. I have a limited knowledge of Auslan but have found that over a period of time, members of the deafblind community have placed their trust in me, especially when I have advocated on their and my behalf for services and attitudes to be changed to accommodate our needs. Deafblind people are, for the most part, socially isolated due to the inability of hearing people to communicate with them.

Many of the issues concerning deafblind people are like those experienced by blind and vision impaired people - for example, transport, education, accommodation, mobility, advocacy, employment and support. Imagine if one has a dual sensory loss, how much more complicated life can be. I have chosen to write about some of the more pressing issues for deafblind people.

### Transport

Deafblind and VHI people are encouraged to travel independently and many do, although most need to have a guide. Travelling independently, as we all know, can be extremely frustrating when destination boards are impossible to read. It is even more difficult and frustrating, when one is unable to hear announcements or communicate with ease with the public, something that blind and vision impaired persons take for granted.

### Education

It has been my experience that many deafblind people have been poorly educated. This, in conjunction with the fact that their language, Auslan, is a visual language without written form, means that many have difficulties with English literacy and have a limited vocabulary in English. This is not to say that the deafblind person is not intelligent, as I quickly realised when communicating with them in their first language, Auslan. Auslan does not rely on spelling of English words. It uses signs to convey concepts and phrases. Most deafblind people do not have Braille skills, although in recent years some people have been taught this method of communication. Without braille, there is no other format available to them. If a deafblind person seeks to further their education, firstly they must check to see if they can have the services of an interpreter before starting their course. Many an opportunity for further education is lost to the deafblind person because provision of an interpreter is denied due to lack of funding or lack of availability of an interpreter skilled and willing to work with a deafblind person.

Only in recent years have the various agencies for sensory loss begun to understand the special need of those people who have a dual sensory loss.

Only recently, with the advent of modern technology and individual classes teaching the internet and email, have deafblind people been able to break through the communication barrier between them and hearing people.

### Mobility

Without mobility training, no blind or vision impaired person can feel safe when walking the streets or using public transport. I personally know of a deafblind person who went to a blindness agency about ten years ago and was given a cane but no mobility instruction because no instructor could communicate with this person. Fortunately, this has now changed, and most deafblind people have undergone mobility training, which has been the single most important factor so far for their ongoing fight for independence. There are now a few mobility instructors (in Melbourne) who have Auslan skills.

There has been a reluctance to train deafblind people with guide dogs although this has been done overseas. It has been stated that deaf people don’t talk, but I have yet to meet a deaf or deafblind person that cannot make words that can be heard. It is hoped in the near future that this situation will be changed, and deafblind people will have the benefit of more freedom of mobility with a trusted guide dog as their companion.

### Support

Whenever deafblind people are asked what they most want, the answer is almost always ‘to have on call someone who will be a guide/interpreter for any activity I wish to pursue’.

In an ideal world, not only would there be people trained in Auslan, as well as guiding skills, but also possessing the ability to describe the surrounding environment. The deafblind person would be able to ring a central register and ask for ‘a facilitator’, at any time of the day, for whatever reason they require, be it for social, recreation or business reasons. A few countries are known to have this service. The DeafBlind Association (Melbourne) provides a community support service, though this is limited due to lack of funding and shortage of people trained in the skills previously mentioned. Most other states have little or no similar service provision for deafblind people. It is the dream of most deafblind people to have a facilitator of their own, a person they can trust and enjoy the type of activities they enjoy.

### Employment

Very little can be said of the possibility for deafblind people to obtain full or part time employment. Most positions require a level of literacy skills which are not always evident with deafblind people. If most prospective employers baulk at employing a blind or vision impaired person, then the idea of employing a deafblind person is even further down the scale. Most deafblind people would cherish the opportunity to obtain employment and therefore have the purchasing power to buy products that could enhance their lifestyle.

### Advocacy

The ADBC is a reasonably new organisation and is just starting to speak on behalf of deafblind people. Unlike BCA, it has some agency staff on its committee, and this is because most deafblind people have poor literacy skills and limited knowledge of how to lobby service providers and government bodies. It is my hope that in time, the ADBC will be recognised as a peak body, speaking as deafblind people on issues important to deafblind people.

## Funding and Donations for BCA

BCA would like to acknowledge the generous work of the Jeffrey Blyth Foundation. The Foundation was formed in 1995 with BCA being the primary beneficiary. And the Shirley Fund, which now sits with the Jeffrey Blyth Foundation following the merger of BCNSW with BCA.

We would also like to acknowledge our funding partners: the Federal Department of Social Services (DSS), the National Disability Insurance Agency, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) NSW; the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) Victoria, DSS via the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), Vision Australia, Guide Dogs Australia, EverAbility, and our generous members and BCA Backers.

If you would like to make a donation to Blind Citizens Australia, you can call 1800 033 660 and use your credit card. You can also donate online <https://www.givenow.com.au/blindcitizensaustralia>. All donations over $2 are tax deductible.

## Submit Your Writing to Blind Citizens News

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