

# EYE on SIGHT

CCB EYECARE CARIBBEAN NEWSLETTER



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## THE MIGHTY LINGO - THE WORLD IS HIS STAGE



The Mighty Lingo receives the 2011 James Alves Award from Baroness Lady Floella Benjamin

*"What you just tell we, I telling you my friend I cannot agree, you might think that you have money but I have to solve me problems with me money"*

*"I watching at you and the way you dress, Well tonight my friend I am impressed. You get some money and you not confused Because look at you tonight you hat is matching you shoes..."*

(The Mighty Lingo - National Extempo Champion, 2007)

With those words the Extempo War was on and the crowd roared to life. The year was 2007 and it was Carnival Time. In the Queens Park Savannah, in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, the Mighty Lingo and his competitor, Black Sage battled for the Extempo Crown.

Joseph Vautor-La Placeliere, whose stage name is The Mighty Lingo was filled with pride when he was crowned Extempo Champion, a feat accomplished by only a few.

The Mighty Lingo has gone down in the history books of his country as being the only person who is blind to wear the crown.

## The Mighty Lingo - The World is His stage

Joseph was born forty years ago totally blind. His mother had contracted Rubella also known as German Measles ; for a pregnant woman this could lead to Congenital Rubella Syndrome with devastating consequences. This was manifested when Joseph was born blind. Naturally this came as a shock to his mother who battled with her emotions.

*"I was born totally blind, my eyes never developed so I have no light perception or colour perception I don't know what I look like or what you look like";*

*"When I was born, the doctor told Mommy that blind people don't live longer than 20 years and I would die before I reach twenty .....*

His mother was devastated, but his Grandfather encouraged her when he said Joseph could surprise everyone later in life.

*"I remember vaguely as a child Mommy praying every night "please make my son see" and I decided, look, this is not for me. I already have no eyes, it makes no sense, I don't even want Doctors interfering with my eyes even if it is possible for me to see, because God created everyone in His own image and likeness and if He wanted me seeing that would have been possible. He put me like this for a purpose"*

As a child, there was no room for sympathy, for Joseph, climbing trees and riding bicycles were the norm.

*"My childhood was very normal....we are a closely knit family (and) in those days there were not as much houses as today, so there was a lot of empty land. I learned to climb trees, ride bicycles and play cricket just like anybody else, my cousins and brothers and sisters never rejected me. If any of us getting licks, I would get licks just like them"*

The time then came for Joseph to go to school. In 1975 he attended the Trinidad and Tobago School for the Blind. While there he immersed himself in the everyday activities and developed a deep love for cricket. For his secondary education, he moved onto the St Joseph's College in 1985. That experience was far from pleasant.

*"After four years, the person who took over as principal, didn't want me in the school , he said I could come there (but) not as a registered student. So I just sat and listened. I couldn't write*

*exams The message was we don't want you ... I was very despondent, nowhere to turn, no one to turn to, I don't think anyone really understood what I was going through"*

*"At St Joseph's there were no provisions for the visually impaired or blind. Today you see children with laptops and so on, but back then we couldn't get text books in the format for the blind, even if there was a computer, there were no screen readers"*

With this twist of fate, his options were severely limited. Joseph contemplated migrating to family in the United States, but that was not possible, in addition, he believes that his mother was way too protective.

And so began his long association with the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association (TTBWA)

*"I left St Joseph's College not knowing where my next move would be. Shortly afterwards I was accepted at the Blind Welfare Association, where they do handicraft work, that helped me pay the bills and to just get along in life.*

Working at the Blind Welfare Association lifted his self esteem.

*"When I just started working it was only five dollars, but I was so proud! I gave my grandmother five dollars. She started crying ....."* he said with pride.



## The Mighty Lingo - The World is His stage

However, he yearned for more, he had a natural gift for music and longed to explore the possibilities.

*"I always knew I had the talent to sing, especially Extempo. At Christmas time, there is a tradition in my family where we would all meet at one house and walk around the block visiting each others homes.*

*And regardless of how you fix up your house for Christmas, trust me, we find some fault in it and they would tell me about it and I would sing, If we couldn't find a fault in the house, we turn to the food. Sometimes the house would look so nice (but) I had to figure out a way to put some humour into to how you decorated your home"*

His passion for music gradually evolved; in 1991 he was the Calypso King of the Blind Welfare. Joseph was encouraged by friends and family to enter the National Extempo Competition but one thing held him back – a lack of confidence.

Extempo is a lyrically improvised form of Calypso and is most notably practiced in Trinidad and Tobago. It consists of a performer improvising in song or in rhythmic speech on a given theme before an audience. It is inherently competitive and success is judged by the wit and ingenuity of the performance.

With constant encouragement he took the bold step and in 1999 he decided to pursue a career in music and with that the stage name "The Mighty Lingo" evolved.

*"I didn't have the confidence, so I told them just leave me alone, when I'm ready I will get into. Eventually I did, in 1999 I entered a competition, the next year a fellow named Holly Thomas who worked on Radio came to me and said he was impressed with what he saw last year and offered to get me into a calypso tent which is every carnival time."*

In 1999 he was accepted and entered the top competition.

*"The first year I was selected as the first reserve, the reason for that is that you're supposed to be a member of the organisation that is promoting the show. The next year I registered and I got into the top eight and placed fifth"*

From then on there was no turning back there was no turning back.

From 2001 to 2004, The Mighty Lingo performed at the Yangatang Calypso Tent and made the National Extempo finals, except in 2002, and 2006. He was also the Calypso King of PAVI in 2004.

As his career evolved, The Mighty Lingo was clearly a crowd pleaser, this was evident when in 2004 the crowd walked out of the tent at the Queens Park Savannah when he was not placed in the top two during the Extempo Championships of that year.

*"In 2004, there was the crisis in Haiti, the topic I selected was the Haitian crisis, I was able to trace 200 years of history in four verses on the spot and yet I still failed to qualify for the finals, the audience walked out of the show. I was so disappointed because I knew I gave a good account of myself. I cried.*

*With that disappointment, I promised I would never enter the competition again, but a contestant came to me and said that will pass over like a storm in a tea cup. He said no one, not even Sparrow - the Calypso King of the World had ever gotten such a response from a crowd. He said Lingo, that's a feather in your cap"*

In spite of some setbacks, his career in the field of Extempo continued. The Mighty Lingo entered several local competitions and always excelled. His big break came in 2007 when he was vindicated on the national stage.

*" In 2007 I didn't expect that I would win after the 2004 result, so when I got into the top four, I didn't expect to make it into the top two. People started telling me that I won, just based on my performance. Nothing or nobody could convince me that I would be in the finals until my name was called. I always promised myself that if I made the finals no body could beat me"*

He was up against the veteran Black Sage.

*"I knew I would take it regardless of the topic. Black Sage and I squared off. In the final round the MC came on and said the audience wanted to hear two more verses - this is after doing the required six. The crowd went wild when we were through. Black Sage held up my hand in victory conceding, we embraced and walked off the stage. Can you believe it? So in 2007 it was the first time a blind person had won a national title in this country"*

All doubt was pushed aside when he realized that the support for him wasn't due to his blindness but how good he was.



Gypsy (right) and The Mighty Lingo

*"They say Gypsy is the greatest in Extempo, but when Lingo walks on stage, Lingo gets a bigger response from Gypsy" he said proudly*

The Mighty Lingo was also crowned National Extempo King in 2008, and 2009. He placed 2nd to Gypsy in 2010.

The Mighty Lingo – is now a household name in Trinidad and Tobago. The strides made by him in the musical arena have not gone unnoticed.

In 2003 he honored by the W.R. Torres Foundation for the Blind and the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association. He has also been honoured by the All-Trinidad Sugar and General Workers Trade Union; the Ministry of Social Development, and past students from the School for the Blind. In 2011 he was recognised by the **Caribbean Council for the Blind/ Eye Care Caribbean** with the James Alves Award.

In reflecting on his life and career so far, this Extempo Extraordinaire says he has a lot to be thankful for.

*"My family is my rock, when I was born, my Grandfather told my mother to support me and that I could make miracles that would surprise her. Imagine, the Doctor told*

*Mommy that I would die before I reach twenty .....well I still waiting to die*

When not on stage, Joseph can be found working away at the TTBWA, his nimble fingers moving swiftly on a handicraft project. His other persona – The Mighty Lingo, comes to life when he gets on stage.

Joseph has shrugged off all limitations and the dreams of this Extempo Champion are never ending.

*"One of my dreams is to perform outside of Trinidad and Tobago - and get paid for it. I have already performed in Jamaica and I had a grand time, so I would like to see myself on stage performing, so that I can live."*

*One of the things I've learned in life, is that the odds are always against me but through it all I've made a choice, that is to make the best of every situation" he said with a smile.*

For Joseph Vautor-La Placeliere aka The Mighty Lingo – the world is indeed his stage.



[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rU8DOe\\_XVg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rU8DOe_XVg)

## From the Desk of the CEO - Arvel Grant



July to September has been a very good quarter for us at **CCB-Eye Care Caribbean**. We were graced with the presence of Lady Floella Benjamin, Baroness of Beckenham, who addressed the Opening Ceremony of Biennial and 44<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary General Meetings and

presented the James Alves Awards to 12 worthy citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

(see photos and citations at <http://eyecarecaribbean.com/our-work-in-trinidad-tobago/the-james-alves-awardees-citations>)

As we continue the buildup to the launch of a more accessible eye health service for persons who cannot afford commercial options, we implemented a special two-day clinic at the Fiennes Institute in Antigua.

The clinic examined 69 residents and staff; prescribed 44 pairs of spectacles; and identified 13 persons needing cataract surgery with several others needing interventions for major conditions which will lead to blindness, if left untreated.

For a summary of the results (<http://eyecarecaribbean.com/latest-news/fiennes-institute-benefits-from-optometry-clinic>)



Dr. Genalin Ang and 3 Refractionists from Guyana conducted the sessions.

(l-r) Dr Genalin Ang, Antonia McCurchin, Luciean Andrews and Khohane Blake

During the quarter, we received unequivocal and public verbal assurances from Dr. the Hon. Baldwin Spencer, Prime Minister of Antigua & Barbuda, and his Minister of Finance, Hon Harold Lovell, of their full support for waiver of all charges on goods and services being imported by **CCB-Eye Care Caribbean**, to carry out the work of our organizations.

See press statement at (<http://eyecarecaribbean.com/latest-news/fiennes-institute-benefits-from-ccb/eye-care-caribbean-optometry-clinic>)



Dr. Baldwin Spencer

We subsequently followed up the Ministers' commitments with formal documentation. This is an extremely important plank, as we move closer to the launch of comprehensive eye health services in Antigua & Barbuda.

As a clear indication of the commitment of the PM and his Cabinet, the Government of Antigua, joined **CCB-Eye Care Caribbean** in providing scholarships to 4 residents of Antigua & Barbuda, to be trained as Refractionists, at the School for Professional Development, University of Guyana. The 4 students begun their course of studies at the start of the current academic year. Upon their return to Antigua, 3 of them will be assigned to Health Centers in Antigua and one in Barbuda.

See statement by the Government at ([http://ab.gov.ag/gov\\_v4/article\\_details.php?id=2169&category=38](http://ab.gov.ag/gov_v4/article_details.php?id=2169&category=38))

The 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter also saw continued preparations, for the establishment of a full service spectacle laboratory in Antigua, to serve Antigua, Barbuda and much of the Eastern Caribbean. **CCB-Eye Care Caribbean** is in the final stages of preparing bid documents, inviting tenders to supply the required equipment and systems. We are also

preparing to start discussions with Government re access to suitable premises to house the facility.

Based on internationally accepted calculations, up to 4% of the region's population is blind or severely visually impaired. That means that (in the English-speaking Caribbean) there are, at least 60,000 persons who are blind, with a further 180,000 so severely visually impaired that they need magnifiers and other low vision appliances, to use what ever little sight they have left.

Furthermore, we estimate that 1 in every thousand children of school age is blind, with 3 in every thousand being so severely visually impaired that they need low vision appliances (including large print text) to take advantage of available educational opportunities.



One of the main reasons why the Caribbean has such a high prevalence of avoidable blindness, is the extreme shortage of Ophthalmologists, Optometrists, Refractionists and other eye health professionals across the region.

Our predicament is highlighted when we compare the ratio of key eye health professionals to population in the United Kingdom, versus the Caribbean. In the UK the ratio of Ophthalmologists to citizens-residents approximates 1 to 24,000; while the ratio of Optometrists to population is closer to one to 10,000.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, the ratio is approximately 1 Ophthalmologist to almost 125,000 and 1 Optometrist to around 100,000.

Until we can get the ratio closer to what obtains in countries like: Australia, France and The UK, we will continue to experience an epidemic of avoidable blindness and visual impairment.

That is why we commend the Government of Antigua & Barbuda, for taking such strong stance in support of Vision 2020 :The Right to Sight.



## WORLD SIGHT DAY - JAMAICA

### Government to increase focus on blind and visually impaired

The government of Jamaica has pledged to increase its focus on the blind and visually impaired and the disabled

community as a whole.

This was the commitment given by Junior Minister in the Ministry of Labour, Andrew Gallimore in his address at



the opening ceremony of a Health Fair that was hosted by the Jamaica Society for the Blind to mark World Sight Day which was celebrated on October 13.

In making reference to the over two hundred and eighty thousand Jamaicans who are disabled, Mr Gallimore said while Jamaica has made strides in providing for this segment of the population, much more needs to be done.

*"There is a lot of work for us to do in this country, not just for those who are blind but for those who are disabled, we have merely touched the hem of the garment. I'm sure we are ahead of some. When we look at access by those in the disabled community, there is a lot of work to do and some of it is inhibited due to financial constrains. There are somethings*

*that we would want to do but the finances hold us back"* he said.

### Media Group commits to public awareness campaign

With the lack of public awareness being cited as one of the setbacks to the limited knowledge concerning challenges faced by the blind and visually impaired, the General Manager of the RJR Communications Group, Gary Allen, made a commitment of having the media organization work with the Jamaica Society for the Blind on a public awareness campaign.



Gary Allen

*"Where awareness is concerned I will give the commitment that my group will work with you to build public service announcements that will make our nation become more aware and give them (the announcements) prominence when you are ready to do so"*

Mr Allen who was the Guest Speaker at the event also lamented the lack of news coverage for events concerning the disabled community in general.

*"Media and society need to pay more attention to sight issues - not just focusing on the subject whenever there is a tragedy. All of*

*this boils down to the overall lack of awareness..*

*An event of this nature should help us recognize that building of awareness is crucial in all areas and can be helpful especially when it comes onto policy making"*

Several persons, including students from nearby schools attended the health fair, where they were screened for hypertension and diabetes and vision tests.

World Sight Day is a world-wide event to focus attention on the global issue of avoidable blindness and vision impairment, is held each year on the second Thursday in October.



## CCB - Making a Difference - the Fiennes Institute



island of Antigua. Stuck by the hardships being experienced by some citizens he took steps to provide them with a place to sleep and a warm meal.

"That's how it all started and it has evolved significantly since then to the point where we are operating a home. This is the Fiennes Institute, so the name came from Governor Fiennes" said Alton Forde, Master of the Fiennes Institute.

From its foundation this Home for the Elderly and Indigent in the twin island state has stuck to the mandate of the late Governor.

*"We have been making efforts at the institute to address care beyond the basics of a bath and a meal, it requires holistic care in that we address every single aspect of the human wellbeing.*

*The Fiennes, has evolved significantly since the 1920s to the point where we are operating a home. It is managed by a department in Government, and the budget comes from Consolidated Funds. As long as you are admitted to the institute it is of no cost to you"* said Mr Forde.



(l-r) Alton Forde, the Hon. Baldwin Spencer, Arvel Grant, Harold Lovell

On any given day, Mr Forde and members of his team are totally focused on the well-being of the sixty four residents who call the Fiennes Institute home. So when Arvel Grant, the CEO of the **Caribbean Council for the Blind (CCB)**, indicated that the organization was interested in conducting an eye clinic at the Institute, Mr Forde welcomed the opportunity.

*"I immediately said yes, because we have a number of persons who are getting blind as they get older and some of them their sight will deteriorate. We are glad of the assistance in terms of glasses and surgery. We are so grateful to Mr Grant and his team for this initiative and I know that residents will benefit tremendously from*

*this effort"* said Mr Forde when he spoke at a function to officially mark the opening of the two-day Eye Clinic.

Led by Dr. Genalin Ang, a Senior Lecturer in Optometry at the University of Guyana, the clinic screened all residents and members of staff and prescribed spectacles and low vision devices.

Over the two day period, Dr Ang and second year optometry students Antonia Mccurchin, Luciean Andrews and Khohane Blake, occupied a building that was transformed into a makeshift clinic on the compound. The residents, some of whom had not had their eyes tested in years, were extremely grateful.

Before getting his eyes tested Andy Lewis, 57, was sure he did not need glasses, but at the end of the process he thought differently.

*"I found that I couldn't see the fine letters, today I found that I can see much better with the vision things. I thought I didn't need glasses, but I now know that I need them. The programme is fantastic, I appreciate you all coming. I can see much much better. I want to see you all come again"* he said.



Dr Ang examines Andy Lewis

The clinic examined 69 residents and staff; prescribed 44 pairs of spectacles; and identified 13 persons needing cataract surgery with several others needing interventions for major conditions which will lead to blindness, if left untreated.

*"The fact that more than 75% of the 69 persons examined at the Fiennes Institute have serious eye conditions, requiring treatment is an indication of the scope of the problem in Antigua and Barbuda. That is why CCB-Eye Care Caribbean is determined to find every means possible to ensure that persons, who cannot afford to purchase eye health services at commercial rates, can get eye care any way",* said Arvel Grant, CEO.

The next phase of this initiative at the Fiennes Institute, includes the handing over of spectacles and low vision devices to those who were examined, and the provision of medical and surgical services where necessary.

*Eye On Sight has been produced with the assistance of our partners including*

The European Union



Sightsavers



Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association/Persons Associated with Visual Impairments(PAVI)



The Government of Antigua and Barbuda



The Jamaica Society for the Blind



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<http://www.eyecarecaribbean.com/act-now/make-a-donation>

*Our Mission.....*

*Our Purpose.....*

*Our Goal.....*

**Our purpose is preventing blindness and visual impairment while restoring sight and creating opportunities for persons whose sight cannot be restored.**

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