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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION OF THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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By Maurice Connor

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### Foreward



Maurice Connor

*Some people may feel that the changes and improvements in the education of the blind and visually impaired have not come rapidly enough during the eighty-six year existence of organized welfare work for the blind in this country.*

*After eleven years as a student at the Institute for the Blind and thirty-four years on the staff of the School for Blind children, Santa Cruz, I can understand these feelings. This state of affairs is not due to any acts of repression by the Committees concerned.*

*It is rather a reflection of the attitude of the society to the disabled: for example, its misguided patronage and excessively custodial approach to the work during the first period.*

*It must be noted, however, that these characteristics are common to the evolution of work for the blind in many*

*countries of the world. Much time is lost before the emphasis is shifted from merely providing the fish to teaching someone how to fish. There must be a more pro-active approach to the education of the blind and visually impaired that will allow many of them to become independent, productive citizens of the community.*

*Education is an ever-changing process and I cherish the hope that someone will find it worthwhile to improve upon this booklet, recording those changes and achievements that are beneficial to the visually challenged.*

*I also cherish very pleasant memories of my brief term as Principal of the School with its mix of the rough and the smooth. My sincere thanks to all the staff for their loyalty and support during that period. I must specially mention Miss Agatha Millington, the Chief House Mother, and Miss Carol Maul, the Clerk Typist. Their excellent co-operation made the day-to-day management much easier.*

*Mrs. Rosalind McNamara, dictationist and friend, has contributed greatly to the production of this booklet. My sincere thanks to her for her invaluable assistance, leafing through the old newspapers in the Archives, thereby providing some background for the beginning of the First Period.*

*Written material on this entire subject is very scant. A great deal is based on my own experience and the oral tradition. I must also thank those special friends and colleagues who did some proof reading and gave some helpful suggestions, and, Mr. Francis Khan who was responsible for the computer production.*

May, 2001

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### *First Period*

At many a critical period in history, someone has appeared on the scene and exerted a profound influence on the course of events. Sir Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during the Second World War, was a source of enormous courage, inspiration and leadership for the people of Britain and their allies.

Here at home, Dr. Eric Williams was an outstanding example of such a person, as one of the leading architects of our nation's independence in 1962.

Several years earlier, Mr. James Augustus Alves landed in this country and became one of the leading pioneers in welfare work for the blind. His arrival some time in late 1913 marked the dawn of a new era not only for the blind of Trinidad and Tobago, but also for the Eastern Caribbean and Guyana.



Dr. Eric Williams - 1st PM of Trinidad and Tobago

This young Guyanese lost his sight as a result of a blow from a cricket ball and was sent to the Royal Normal College in England for further education and rehabilitation. On his return to the West Indies, he visited some of the other islands, but, according to him he found the greatest interest and most encouraging response to his efforts on behalf of the blind here in Trinidad.

It was, however, not an easy task, as Mr. Alves used to say. He had to travel through the countryside, often by donkey cart with a young sighted boy as his guide, coaxing and pleading, not only with the blind but with members of the general public as well. His enthusiasm and indomitable spirit helped him to achieve much more than he expected.

Armed with letters of introduction from prominent persons at the College, Mr. Alves approached some influential members of the community and succeeded in obtaining their help. Among these were the Roman Catholic Archbishop Pius Dowling and the Governor, Sir George Leigh Hunt, who played a very active role in getting the project off the ground.

At a public fund-raising meeting held at the Royal Victoria Institute (now known as the National Museum) on June 2, 1914, the Governor said that he had become interested in such a project since the fatal shooting of Mr. Swanston which had occurred shortly after his arrival some years before.

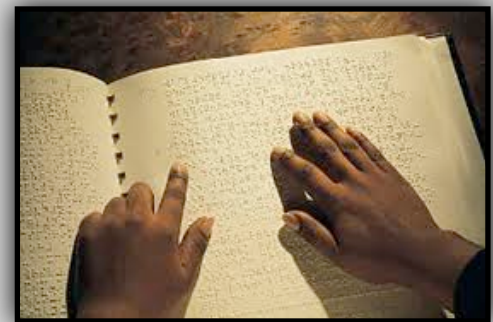
(Mr. Swanston's daughter, Christabelle, who was also shot during the incident, lost her sight.) She learned to read Braille through her own initiative and with the help of friends who obtained books from abroad).

The Governor also said that Mr. Alves' arrival and presentation of an organized scheme had provided the means by which a small start could be made. He went on to say that the Legislature had agreed to make an annual grant of £100 towards the scheme and that he had asked the Board of Industrial Training to manage it, thereby ensuring that matters would be run in a business-like way. The Governor made an earnest appeal for funds that night and was ably supported by some other prominent citizens.

The Board of Industrial Training set up a sub-committee to manage the project. After several meetings and appeals for fittings and furniture, the Institute for the Blind as it was then called, opened its doors on May 18, 1914. (That date is still commemorated as Founder's Day by the blind of Trinidad and Tobago).

According to the Gazette Newspaper the Governor declared the building open at a function held on that very afternoon. Some members of the Board were present, Messrs. H. R. Marwood, D. M. Hahn, C. B. Franklin and T. B. Jackson (Secretary). A number of blind persons were entertained to tea after the function.

In those early days the curriculum consisted of the teaching of reading in Braille and Moon Type, Braille writing, handicraft and bed making. Moon Type was a system of embossed letters which closely resembled print. It was invented by Dr. William Moon for those whose fingers were not sufficiently sensitive to cope with the Braille.



Very few people learned to read Moon and Braille became the only form of reading and writing taught throughout the school.

During the morning sessions from nine to eleven reading and writing were taught. In the afternoon sessions between one and three, the accent was on handicraft and bed making. Basket making was the main form of handicraft at that time.



Angela Rivers - handicraft employee

Miss Christabelle Swanston, who was doing a pupil teacher's course at the time of the shooting incident, became Mr. Alves' assistant, and was responsible for the teaching of needlework to the women, with help from Miss Lucia Williams, the first Matron to be appointed to the Institute.

Miss Williams was given two rooms at the back of the premises. In later years, more spacious quarters were provided upstairs in the main building overlooking Duke and Edward Streets. Implementation of the curriculum was a slow process, for material was not readily available.

The teaching of basket making, for example, did not begin until early September, 1914, when the Board was able to obtain the services of an instructor.



Getting books and apparatus from abroad was very slow and unreliable. It would seem that Mr. Alves had the onerous task of preparing much of the reading material by hand.

As time went on, however, the curriculum did expand and by 1936, the year in which I arrived in Trinidad, reading, writing, arithmetic, history and geography, piano and the rudiments of typing all formed the scholastic programme.



Cyril Scott - handicraft employee

Basket-making was still the main form of handicraft, with chair-caning running a close second. There was also some mat-making, which was done on a small scale, according to orders received.

Adults and children were taught in the same classroom. It was a large, spacious room with many glass windows. The men and boys sat at a table on one side of the room, and the women and girls occupied the opposite side. There was a wide passageway between the two sides. One could walk from the front entrance straight through this passage to what was called the "lobby", where the Matron's office was located.

Mr. Alves was still the Head Teacher and remained thus until his retirement in 1941. He was assisted by monitors, that is, young "bright" students who did not go to the basket shed or the chair-caning room.

A Braille examination was held one year after the Institute was opened but this was discontinued for some unclear reason. During my time any attempt to introduce examinations was firmly resisted by some of the administrators. There must have been some kind of assessment, for an annual prize-giving function was held at the Royal Victoria Institute around Christmas time during my early years as a student.

The standard of elementary education in the three R's was fairly good, for Mr. Alves always encouraged the students to aim for excellence. Many of them did but were deprived of the opportunity to pursue further studies.

The most outstanding achiever of that early period was Joe Purtie. He was discovered among the adults at the House of Refuge (now the St. James Medical Complex) and was brought to the Institute in 1923 at the tender age of four. He was a good student and an excellent pianist. Joe was, in fact, the first blind student to sit an external exam in piano, under the guidance of Mr. Donald Greaves, a leading musician and choirmaster of the day.

Unfortunately, these records have been lost but Joe was indeed a household name during the 1940's and 50's. He accompanied many well-known singers at concerts and on the radio and was in great demand for "at homes", as house parties were called in those days. When Mr. Alves retired, Joe was appointed Headmaster and held that position for a number of years until his appointment as Field Secretary in the Blind Welfare Association which was incorporated by an Act of the Legislature in 1947.

Like most elementary schools, we received all our reading material from England. Much of it was interesting and in many instances, formed a good introduction to literature. The only local book which I can still recall was "The Little Folks" from which we learned some geography of our country. An interesting subject which was done every Wednesday afternoon was General Knowledge.

Each student was required to prepare ten questions for answers and be the quiz master for that day. Though many of the questions were far-fetched, we learned a great deal about our country, especially Port of Spain. We learned what streets bounded certain prominent buildings, such as the Red House and the Queen's Park Oval, as well as the names of some of the streets which crossed main traffic thoroughfares.



The Red House- the House of Parliament



Downtown Port of Spain  
(library2.nalis.gov.tt)

I can certainly say that this knowledge was quite useful to me when my turn came to leave the Institute and I had to get around the City under my own steam, so to speak.

Another informative feature of our scholastic life in those days was the visits by students from schools across the City. I can recall many an exciting mental arithmetic competition.

We didn't often win but they were nevertheless stimulating. Extracurricular activities were not very numerous. In the month of December, some of the adults and children, encouraged and assisted by Mrs. Leila Gordon Smith, a member of the Institute's Committee, would prepare a concert which was performed at the House of Refuge.

I remember quite vividly playing "Torno Soriento" on a one-key fife -my first performance on the flute. There was a little touch of drama on one occasion when Mrs. Thomas, the teacher in charge of the ladies, wrote a play entitled "Politeness Pays Best".

As a result of this effort an attempt was made to form a drama and recreation club, but the first meeting was so chaotic that the effort had to be abandoned. All was not lost, however, for some of the adults displayed their talent at the annual treat sponsored by the Coterie of Social Workers or Optimist Club, reciting one of their favourite poems or rendering a popular song of the day.

### ***Life in Residence***

I have not been able to find out when children were first admitted as residents.

The first resident student may have been admitted in 1916, two years after the Institute was opened. During my years as a student there were six to eight children in residence at any one time. The girls and younger boys occupied the upstairs dormitory, while the older boys lived in the one downstairs.

There were six members of staff: a Matron, who was responsible to the Board for the entire operation of the Institute, a nursemaid who looked after the children, a maid to look after the Matron's needs and quarters and assist with the children, a cook, a washer and a porter.

Life was rather boring during my first two years at the Institute, for the girls and younger boys had to spend all day upstairs, coming down only for meals. When Mrs. Inez Nelson was appointed Matron in 1938, these rules were relaxed and we enjoyed a greater run of the place, after school and on week-ends. She also found some musical instruments which were locked up in a cupboard: a guitar, cuatro, cello and flute and made them available to the students. As a result, we formed a small ensemble which came together to practise on Saturday afternoons. We were also allowed more freedom to use the piano.



Students at Salvation Army school for the Blind, Jamaica

On afternoons during the week we would go for walks to Victoria Square and many children came to chat with us. That's where I first met Monica Ortiz, who later became one of the country's leading sopranos.

Sometimes we would go to other parks such as Woodford Square, Lord Harris Square or the Memorial Park. Victoria Square was the most popular one, perhaps because it was the nearest to the Institute. On Sunday afternoons we strolled down town "by the stores" as we used to say.

The religious needs of the children were also looked after. On Sunday mornings the Roman Catholics attended 6.30 Mass at Sacred Heart Church while the "rest" went to the mid morning service at Trinity Cathedral. There was also a general service for all which was held in the classroom every Tuesday morning. This was conducted by some members of the Trinity Deanery; Dean Holt visited regularly.



Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church (trinioutdoors.com)

On Wednesday mornings a Nun came to give religious instructions to the RC's. Morning and night prayers were mandatory for the younger children and these were supervised and taught by some of the senior girls.

Mrs. Inez Nelson was the last Matron to be appointed. During her term of office there was a marked improvement in the freedom and social life of the children in residence. She also made significant improvements in the general business of the Institute.

In 1942 there was a change in the administrative pattern. The committee invited the Salvation Army to appoint a married couple, the husband to be the superintendent and the wife in the role of the chief housekeeper. This arrangement with the Salvation Army lasted for approximately one year, and brought no significant change in the running of the Institute. The appointment of a married couple to run the affairs of the Institute was continued during the remaining years of its existence.

As the years went by, the administrators became less rigid in their approach to the work and so the students were able to enjoy a greater degree of socialization. Joe Purdie would often bring some of the singers to rehearse at the Institute and I can even recall going to the Radio Distribution (which was later known as The Rediffusion Network) as part of the ensemble to play on one of the programmes. I was also allowed to audition for one of Auntie Kay's early talent shows on Radio. Some of the girls from nearby Tranquillity School used to visit us on afternoons and we enjoyed some happy friendships with them.

During Mr. Arthur Roberts' term as Superintendent, the Nelsonian Players rehearsed quite often at the Institute and I would sometimes be asked to provide background music for a scene. The young people were quite friendly and I really enjoyed doing it.

In the late 1930's during the Christmas Season, we had visits from philanthropic groups who came with generous gifts. Each year children from Miss Ritchie's School gave a most entertaining concert. Another group which came regularly during the Christmas Season was Bert McLean and some members of his jazz band. They played current songs and calypsos and everyone, children, adults and staff, enjoyed themselves immensely partaking of the refreshments and tripping the light fantastic, but the advent of the Second World War put a damper on these activities.



Trinidad and Tobago's Blind Cricket team

Our sports and recreation were not very organized. We did have a try at some tug-of-war and our own modified version of cricket. I can remember doing some arm and leg exercises -or drill as it was called to instructions and recorded music which were played on the popular wind-up gramophone.

The most popular game among the men and boys was dominoes. We didn't put the dominoes in formation; they were simply pushed into the centre of the table and we made mental notes of the matching ends. This made the rounds go much faster and there was great excitement when someone made a mistake or "blocked" a game.



There were times, too, when the porter would take some of the older boys for an early morning walk around the Savannah, but these were infrequent.

At the age of eighteen most of the boys went to the Swanston Memorial Home, which was located on Cipriani Boulevard at that time. The girls moved over to the St. Mary's Home for Blind Women on Fraser Street, which was run by the Coterie of Social Workers. These young adults continued to attend the Institute, either working at one of the crafts in the workshop or as monitors in the classroom.

[www.panoramio.com](http://www.panoramio.com)

The older adults who came to the Institute did very good work and were generally content with their lot. For some of the young people who changed residence, however, life took a different turn. Welfare work for the blind during that early period was extremely custodial. When a person entered the Institute it became his/her world, so to speak. Very little thought, if any, was given to preparing the students for the world outside.

Consequently, when a student left the shelter of the Institute with a more than satisfactory elementary education, and, having certain expectations, there was keen disappointment and frustration when these ambitions could not be realized. Some people sent for correspondence courses but these soon petered out, for one reason or another.

Others sought escape in alcohol. There were, indeed, many discussions among some of the young people who became very cynical and bitter at the failure of some social encounter. There were some, on the other hand, who, in spite of the severe disadvantages, led useful lives, got married and raised families.

Around the mid '40's, there were signs that a wind of change was beginning to blow. The Committee of the day invited Col. E. A. Baker, Managing Director of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) to come to Trinidad, conduct a survey and submit a report. In a news release it was reported that the Committee had accepted the report in principle. Unfortunately, we have not been able to obtain a copy of that report.



Joseph Vautor-La Placeliere - at work



Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association  
(TTBWA)

Col. Baker returned to Canada and some time later Mr. David Lawley, then head of the Field Services Department of CNIB, came to this country to assist with the formation and establishment of the Trinidad & Tobago Blind Welfare Association. The Association came into existence by Ordinance in 1947.

The transfer of responsibility for the Institute from the Board of Industrial Training to the newly formed Association marked the end of the first period of welfare work for the blind in Trinidad and Tobago and the beginning of a new era.

## SECOND PERIOD

A different outlook is reflected in the opening paragraph of the Ordinance, which states that the Association is responsible for full training, education and placement of blind persons. One of the most important steps taken by the Association during its early years was the separation of school from the workshop. The building at the corner of Duke and Edward Streets became a commercial centre and also housed the head offices of the Association. The new school, situated in the Santa Cruz Valley, opened its doors in January, 1952. The children at Duke Street were moved to the new school and within a short period of time the student population began to increase.



Admission of students from islands in the Eastern Caribbean and Guyana started in 1953. The number of applications from these territories was so great that very soon the overseas contingent amounted to nearly 50% of the student population.

This regional approach was due in large measure to the influence of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, which was doing some very good work in the Caribbean during the '50's and '60's. Because of financial constraints and the changing educational trends, the overseas student population decreased

considerably and is, in fact, now down to zero.

With the advent of the new school, there came a completely new approach to the education of blind and visually impaired children. Attempts were made to place children in classes according to age or ability, regular testing was done and end-of-term examinations were introduced. Some new subjects were added to the timetable: Gardening and Woodwork for the boys and Domestic Science (Home Economics) for the girls. Every effort was made to follow the national curriculum and more local textbooks were introduced.

The academic work among the infants and juniors was always quite lively and interesting. When they reached the senior stage, however, some of the children began to find it rather boring. Some complained that they were repeating the work year after year until it was time to leave. The staff recognized the problem and, in an effort to stimulate more interest in the work among the seniors, it was decided to introduce the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination.



A student at the Salvation Army School for the Blind, Jamaica

The Ministry of Education was quite receptive to the idea and around 1980-1981 a number of students wrote that examination for the first time. It was indeed a great incentive to the students. Those who obtained a partial certificate did not mind returning to try for a full one in the following year.

Though the new school was still classified as primary, it soon became clear to the staff that some students were capable of going well beyond that stage. Thus it was that in 1958 arrangements were made to send the first student abroad for specialized training in stenography and related subjects.

Francis Khan spent approximately one year at the Training College of the Royal National Institute for the Blind at Pembridge Place, London, a centre for young adults. He passed all the examinations set by the Royal Society of Arts.



Francis Khan

Shortly after his return he was employed by Barclays Bank DCO (now Republic Bank Limited) and has been there ever since. Francis Khan has branched out into other areas of work at the bank and is making an even greater contribution today with the aid of his computer. His success also marked the breakthrough into open employment for the blind and visually impaired in this country.

Some years later Ramesh Ramnathsingh, another student, was sent to the same college in London to study stenography. On his return he worked in the Public Service for a period of time after which he emigrated to the United States.

Still a little later on Cecilia Ramsawacksingh, one of our first students to write the GCE O-Level examinations, worked with the Ministry of Education for some time after returning from England, where she took a secretarial course.

One of our overseas students from Antigua, Ivor Ford, attended the Royal Normal College (now known as the National College for the Blind) and studied stenography. When he returned to Antigua he worked with the Supreme Court for a while but is now doing valuable work with the Ministry of Youth in that island.

Another Antiguan, Aubrey Webson, has done very good work on behalf of the blind at international level. He was the first Executive Director of the Caribbean Council for the Blind to be appointed from the Caribbean and then worked for a while with Helen Keller International, after which his services were sought by Hilton Perkins, a U.S.-based Non-Governmental Organization which gives technical assistance to developing countries undertaking projects for the visually impaired, where he is now in charge of Caribbean and African Affairs.



Aubrey Webson

The teaching of music, especially piano, has been a part of the school's curriculum for many years. It has been, and still is, one skill which enables a blind person to become more independent and self-reliant. A number of students have taken the practical examinations of the Royal Schools, with most outstanding among them being Michael Nedd, a native of Guyana. He too was sent to England initially to study stenography.

Fortunately for him, he was able to switch to music and went on to obtain his LRAM.

Although the piano remained the chief instrument for the teaching of music, efforts were made to introduce other instruments. In the late '50's, one of the leading oil companies donated a set of pans and our first steel band was formed.

It was given the happy title of The Merrymakers School Orchestra. With the departure of the students around 1963, interest in the steel band lapsed. There was, however, a revival during the 1970's. Thanks to Mr. Winston Graham of Caribbean Steel Pan Manufacturers, we were able to obtain a new set of pans. Also through Mr. Graham's initiative, we enjoyed the services of Mr. Fitzroy Inniss as tutor.



Mr. Inniss came on Monday afternoons and spent about two hours teaching the boys and girls. The children enjoyed the lesson periods but, as was the case with so many music students, very little practice was done. One girl, Shirley Dookhantie, entered one of the national Pan Festivals and gave a creditable solo performance.

The guitar was another popular instrument among the students. Mrs. Connie Julian, an American who lived here for some years, started the class and also purchased some very good guitars for the School. Mrs. Julian also made a stirring appeal to one of the service clubs and succeeded in obtaining some valuable books for the music library. Before her departure, she asked Patrick Goveia, one of the country's well-known guitarists, to take over the class. Patrick has made an invaluable contribution to the musical education of the students for a good many years. The guitar was not as popular as the piano or the steel pan, but some of the students gained sufficient musical knowledge which enabled them to play in simple keys and accompany themselves on occasions.

David Matthews was one of the few students who went on to provide some entertainment at his family's business place, also, Allyson Nelson, a graduate of St. Dominic's Convent who has performed at concerts and tea parties, singing and accompanying herself on the instrument.

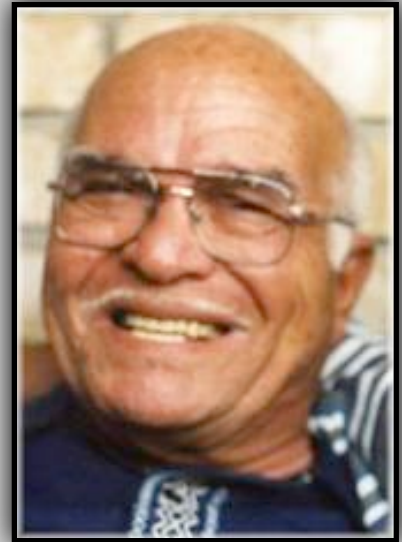
Both boys and girls enjoyed learning to play the recorder, for it was a relatively simple instrument to handle and it gave them a sense of achievement when they learned to play simple tunes fairly quickly.

We have had some successful performances at concerts with trios and soloists and one boy from Tobago, Colin Roberts, entered the National Music Festival. He gave quite a good account of himself, scoring a mark of 84.

The contribution of Mrs. Rita Knox to the musical life of the school cannot be overlooked.

As wife of the first Resident Principal, Mr. John Knox, she occupied the post of House Mother for several years. Her knowledge of the piano and keen interest in singing was of enormous benefit to the students, particularly the girls. She taught them some beautiful duets and vocal solos. It was due to her coaching that Yvonne Bennett, a student with a lovely soprano voice, was able to enjoy some success in one of the National Music Festivals.

It was also due to her efforts that the Christmas concerts were such outstanding successes during the late '50's and early '60's. They were in fact the highlight of the school year.



John Knox

### **Handicraft**

The extent to which handicraft has been taught has been a subject of much debate among members of staff. Plasticene and paper folding (origami) are always useful tools with which to develop the manual skills among the infants and juniors.

In the upper classes knitting was introduced from time to time, depending on the knowledge and initiative of the teachers. Mrs. Rita Knox carried on a craft class after lunch for several years, teaching rug weaving and simple sewing to the girls. Under Mr. Fitzgerald Blackman's tuition, some of the senior boys learned the traditional crafts of basketry and chair caning. They were therefore able to hold their own when the time came for them to leave school and attend one of the workshops.

The crowded curriculum of the primary school has always limited the amount of time available for craft. It may therefore fall to the lot of the Association to explore areas of new crafts that could be developed for the senior children and young adults in order that they may be able to support themselves and their families.

### **Appointment and Training of Teachers**

In the early days of the new school's existence, teachers were appointed either directly by the Association or through secondment from the regular Teaching Service. This dual system of appointment led to problems of discipline and security of tenure. As the years went by, the system was regularized and teachers are now appointed by the Teaching Service Commission. It has also been made mandatory that any applicant for a teaching position must be a qualified teacher of the country or possess qualifications equivalent thereto. Specialized in-service training has also been made a requirement.

Mr. John Knox, the first Resident Principal, was sent to England on an observation course in September of 1953. In 1955 the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind assigned an educational adviser whose job it was to train teachers in schools for the blind in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Arthur Miller, the Education Adviser, conducted a course which was prepared by the College of Teachers of the Blind in England.

At the conclusion of this course in 1957, the teachers wrote an examination and successful candidates were awarded an overseas diploma by the College. Teachers in Trinidad and Tobago who received the diploma were given a salary increase in the following year.

In subsequent years teachers were sent abroad for further training, some to England and others to the United States.

More recently, the Caribbean Council for the Blind has sponsored courses for teachers throughout the region who are involved in mainstreaming.

Mico College in Jamaica has also included a component for the visually impaired in its Special Education Programme. Three teachers from the Santa Cruz School have attended the course. The Trinidad & Tobago Association for Special Education (TTASET) has also started a training programme in which four teachers have participated. This course is run in conjunction with the University of Sheffield, England.



The Mico College, Jamaica

The ever-changing ideas and developments in technology in the field of Special Education clearly indicate the necessity not only to qualify, but also the need to keep abreast of the changing outlook and apparatus available.

#### **Residence Life and Extracurricular Activities:**

The new school was built to accommodate fifty children. During the years when overseas students attended, the building was almost always full. With the decline in overseas attendance the numbers dropped sharply for a while.

In recent times, however, there has been a significant increase in the number of students being registered, either as residents taking the internal programme, or as day students being integrated.

Because the school is residential, there are of necessity two categories of staff:

The house and domestic staff comprising the Chief House Mother with a number of assistants (this varies from time to time), three maids to clean, two cooks, laundress, part-time ironers, a grounds-man and a chauffeur/handyman;

The Principal who is responsible for the entire operation of the plant, and five or six teachers.

There are at present seven teachers, two of whom do itinerant work.

This staff structure was retained for many years during the life of the school. Mr. Errol Pilgrim, the second Principal, brought about a change in the residence requirements when he moved off the premises.

This resulted in a greater degree of joint management between the Chief House Mother and the Principal, a situation which still exists.

The overseas students suffered a disadvantage common to many residential schools, having to deal with boredom. They would come to school in September at the beginning of the academic year and not return home until the long holiday in July-August. Efforts were made to have them spend the shorter vacations at foster homes but this met with limited success. Eventually, arrangements were made for them to return home for all vacations. Dealing with the boredom on weekends and public holidays was always difficult, though the staff and friends often took children who remained at the school on various outings.

On the plus side were some of the extracurricular activities in which the students were able to participate with the resident teachers and volunteers.

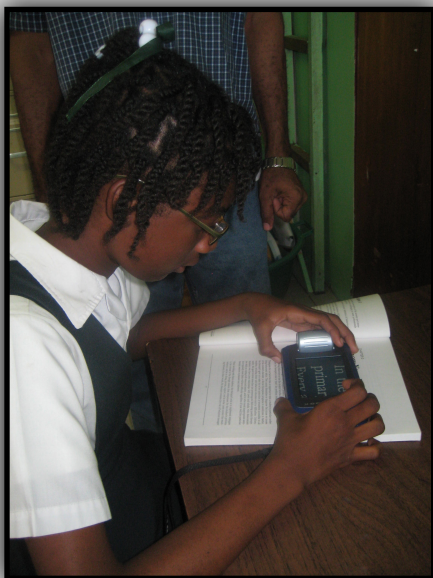
The boys enjoyed some good years of scouting with Messrs. Henry Johnson and Errol Pilgrim, two resident teachers who were keen on scouting. Under Mr. Pilgrim's guidance and supervision the scout troop enjoyed some successful camping trips and participated in some national competitions.

The students are still involved in the Scout movement under the guidance of Mr. Rudolph Paponette, who is in charge of the Second Santa Cruz Cub-Scout Pack. They made a trip to Tobago and enjoyed several days of camping with some of their sighted colleagues.

There was also a Girl Guide Group and Brownies started by Mrs. Rita Knox and subsequently carried on by an Assistant House Mother. The group is now being run by a volunteer Guide Mistress and is doing quite well.



Rudolph Paponette



In addition to the house system, the teaching staff introduced other activities in an effort to explore and develop the interest of the students. The most outstanding of these was the Senior Literary Club which was formed in 1954 under Mr. John Knox's guidance.

The standard of debates and speeches varied with the change of students, but it became a kind of "prestige" club, one that the juniors looked forward to joining.

Another interesting activity which resulted from a conversation I had with Mr. Blackman, one of the teachers, was Good English Week.

During that week we highlighted some aspects of language in various ways. There were reading competitions, a talk on some aspects of language, spelling competitions, and a sentence-correcting competition. I think the sentence correcting was the most humorous part of the week.

The preparation and execution of this project was a joint effort by all the teachers and the students enjoyed it immensely. The success was so encouraging that we invited the Santa Cruz R.C. School to join us one year. The students accepted the challenge and gave a very good account of themselves.

Swimming became a very important part of the recreation and physical education programme when the Junior Chamber of Commerce constructed a pool on the premises around 1961.

Mrs. Rowland Hunt, the wife of one of the British High Commissioners, and some members of the U.K. Women's Club, gave swimming lessons to the students for several years.

Unfortunately, the Club was unable to continue this programme, but alternative arrangements were made for it to be carried on. Over time, however, as a result of inadequate maintenance, the pool has fallen into a state of disrepair and up to the time of writing the swimming programme has been suspended.

Among our extracurricular activities I must mention the trips made to Tobago. These could not have been accomplished without the help of generous benefactors from both islands. The children enjoyed these trips immensely, especially those who experienced a plane ride for the first time.



Special tribute must be paid to those volunteers who have made invaluable contributions to the life and work of the students over the years. To the dictationists who helped with the braille of texts, the readers who recorded the many lessons and books, the swimming teachers and many others who continue to help in all sorts of ways.

Among the many changes that have taken place over the years is the complete closure of the school on weekends and public holidays. I think it is true to say that both staff and students were happy with this change. It is certainly in keeping with the trend towards integration and more community involvement in the general education of the children.



### **Integration**

It was only some twelve to thirteen years after the opening of the new school when integration began. Great credit must be given to the Principal and teachers for their progressive approach to the education of the blind and visually impaired. An enormous amount of perseverance and patience was needed to convince the Committee of the day, but with the help of a U.N. Representative and the co-operation of Mr. Donald Pierre, Minister of Education, Mr. Knox was able to surmount that barrier. After some serious teething problems, three students were allowed to complete their primary education at the San Juan Presbyterian School. In 1967 these students gained entry into secondary schools.

Cecilia Ramsawacksingh and Donna Jodhan attended St. Joseph's Convent, Port of Spain, and Trevor Small went to Trinity College. It must be noted that in those days entry into secondary schools was gained through the co-operation of the Principal and staff of the schools involved, though the Ministry of Education did give their silent blessing.

Writing the Common Entrance test was introduced several years later. One important condition laid down by the Ministry was that the work at the Santa Cruz School was not to be affected adversely by this new venture, an undertaking readily agreed to by the Principal. Ways and means were worked out whereby the extra workload could be handled.

It was truly heart-warming to witness the excitement and enthusiasm among the staff as we began this new venture. The Principals and teachers of the schools concerned were also very keen in helping to solve any problems that might arise.

Some members of the Santa Cruz School staff remained after hours to help the students with their homework in the new subject areas of foreign languages and science. Mathematics had its special problems.

That group of students showed no aptitude for it and were allowed to drop it at an early stage. The problems were tackled successfully in later years when maths became a requirement for the full Certificate.

An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to the many volunteers without whom integration could not have succeeded. Outstanding among those in the early days were Mrs. Anne Hilton and some members of the U.K. Women's Club, who recorded textbooks and helped with the dictation of lessons to be brailled. The Club also assisted by providing many tapes and tape recorders for the students.

In 1972, Cecilia, Donna and Trevor became the first students from the School for the Blind to write the GCE O-Level Examinations. What an exciting time that was! The GCE Syndicate said that the questions would be sent in Braille, but arrangements would have to be made locally for the transcription of the answers into print.

A dictationist and a typist were on standby for each student and at the end of each examination a "true" reproduction of the student's work was put into print and forwarded to the Syndicate via the Ministry of Education. That method of operation has been carried on through the years, except when a student has been able to type his/her own work. Undoubtedly, the use of hi-tech equipment will, in time, eliminate the need for a typist and dictationist.

As time went by students attended other schools such as Fatima College, Queen's Royal College, St. Mary's College and Bishop Anstey High School. Special mention must be made of St. Dominic's Convent.



Claudette Paponette

The Principal accepted a number of our girls over the years, including two who wanted to repeat some of the GCE O-Level subjects. It was from this school, also, that our first professional went on to Mausica Teachers' College.

Mrs. Claudette Paponette received her certificate in 1979 and is making an invaluable contribution at the school in Santa Cruz. Our first from the University of the West Indies was also a student from St. Dominic's. Maureen Ramroop received her B.Sc. degree from the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, in 1992.

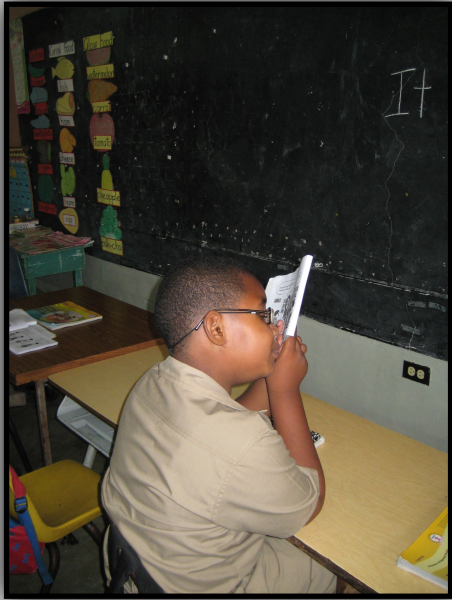
The first university graduate, however, was Donna Jodhan, one of three who wrote the GCE Examinations in 1972. She obtained her B.Com Degree from Concordia University in 1977, and, four years later working part time, she received her MBA from McGill.

Integration at primary level has been increased. This means that the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination could be another channel through which successful blind and visually impaired students could be mainstreamed -the current term for integration.



Donna Jodhan

([media-dis-n-datndat.blogspot.com](http://media-dis-n-datndat.blogspot.com))



All this is in keeping with the trend towards full scale integration, except for those children with additional handicaps who cannot fit into the regular school system. While it cannot be denied that mainstreaming offers many social and psychological advantages to those working alongside their sighted colleagues, there are some concerns as to how and when it should begin. Answers to these questions would depend largely on the ability and condition of the student.

Children whose impairment can be improved or corrected through the use of a simple aid can begin at the earliest level. Those who need more specialized apparatus or who must use Braille will have to be given special training either in a class at the regular school, or at a special school.

This situation reinforces the argument of those who feel that children should be taught the required skills before they are mainstreamed. Another important consideration is the ratio of itinerant teachers to mainstreamed students. Regular contact with the students is essential, especially for those at primary level.

It is not my intention to discuss the pros and cons of mainstreaming. I have mentioned the points in the preceding paragraphs to illustrate the monumental task facing the school at Santa Cruz. Children with additional handicaps who cannot fit into the regular school system must be catered for. In addition, those in the main stream must be provided with books and apparatus and be serviced by itinerant teachers. Obviously, the school cannot do it alone.

Within recent years the number of children being mainstreamed from the School at Santa Cruz has increased, thereby placing a great burden on the staff and stretching the available facilities.

In an Education Policy Paper, prepared by a National Task Force on Education, mainstreaming of special children is recommended, except for severe cases. Plans for implementation are discussed in some detail: the establishment of Diagnostic Prescriptive Centres, greater family involvement and public education programmes.

Implementation of these ideas will certainly take some time.

These are indeed excellent plans and the Special Education Unit within the Ministry should be the body responsible for preparing and co-coordinating such programmes for special children. The Unit would be able to draw on the wealth of knowledge and experience acquired by personnel directly involved in the work when developing and implementing the ideas contained in the policy paper. A more pro-active role by the Association would be of great assistance, especially in the area of family contact and public education programmes



Arvel Grant - CEO - Caribbean Council for the  
Blind

It must be admitted, however, that this kind of education is very expensive and it is necessary, therefore, to seek regional and international co-operation with organizations such as the Caribbean Council for the Blind and other agencies in the developed countries if any real success is to be achieved.

Under-pinning all these efforts must be the commitment and dedication by our teachers, associations and families which will help the students acquire that self esteem and self-confidence they will need in order to meet and overcome the challenges they will encounter during and after "school" life.

**Published in Inkprint and Braille by kind permission of the Author May, 2001  
In loving memory of my parents and my Trinidad Mum, Mrs. Inez Nelson.**

