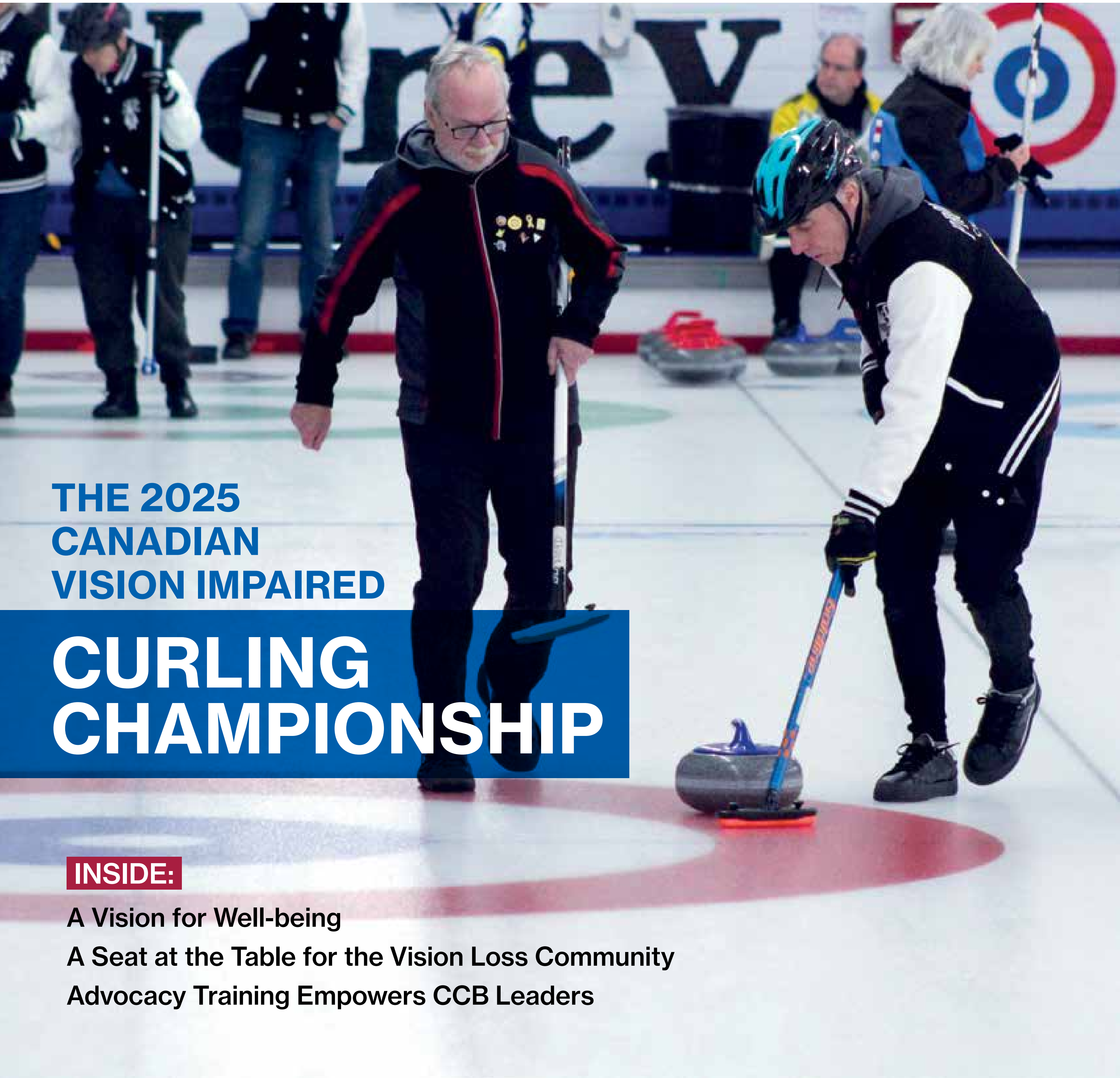
THE CANADIAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND

MAY 2025

White Cane Magazine

The Voice of the Blind™ in Canada



THE 2025 CANADIAN VISION IMPAIRED CURLING CHAMPIONSHIP

INSIDE:

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CANADIAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND

White Cane Magazine is published two times yearly, in May and October, by the Canadian Council of the Blind under the direction of Keith Communications Inc. The publisher accepts no responsibility for advertiser claims, unsolicited manuscripts, photographs, transparencies, or other materials.

President's Message

PHOTO BY: **ANDRE MARTIN**

As we move forward into another impactful year, I am proud to share highlights of the Canadian Council of the Blind's recent milestones and the values that continue to drive our mission of advocacy, inclusion, and empowerment for Canadians living with vision loss.

As we move forward into another impactful year, I am proud to share highlights of the Canadian Council of the Blind's recent milestones and the values that continue to drive our mission of advocacy, inclusion, and empowerment for Canadians living with vision loss.

One of the most exciting events on our calendar is fast approaching. On May 27, we will gather in Ottawa for our National Conference and Annual Appreciation Dinner, titled *Together we Thrive*. This year's event shines a light on the powerful role of social prescription, the practice of connecting individuals with vision loss to community-based supports that promote health, connection, and inclusion. We invite our members, partners, and friends to join us in exploring how building social networks can significantly improve well-being and quality of life for our community.

This issue of *White Cane Magazine* also features a timely editorial titled *Keeping Focused on Moving Forward*. Author Mike Potvin reinforces why community and inclusion are needed to combat isolation. The article emphasizes the need to overcome the barriers imposed not just by the built environment but also those that limit access to the information and knowledge imperative for success in modern society. Programs like the CCB's GTT program are in place to help address some of these barriers, but as Mike highlights, there are still more resources needed to address isolation.

In the spirit of recognizing leadership and dedication within our community, I am thrilled to announce that Kelly MacDonald will be honoured with this year's President's Award, and Louise Gillis has been named our Person of the Year. Kelly's tireless work in accessible broadcasting and disability awareness, alongside Louise's decades of service and advocacy at the provincial, national, and international level, embody the very best of what the CCB represents.

This year's White Cane Week celebration was made extra special by the return of the Canadian Vision Impaired Curling Championship (CVICC), an event that brought together teams from across the country in the spirit of sport and camaraderie. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to Corry Stuive and Louise Gillis for their dedication in making the event a tremendous success. Congratulations to the Eric Rosen Rink from Prince George, BC, for their gold-medal win!

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge the efforts of the National Board, who recently came together in Ottawa to participate in advocacy training for leaders. These sessions are helping to ensure that our representatives across Canada are equipped with the skills, confidence, and tools needed to champion the priorities of our community at every level.

As we continue to celebrate Vision Health Month this May, let's remember that progress is not just about medical advances or policy victories, it's also about community. Ensuring everyone has a place, a purpose, and a seat at the table is real progress.

Yours in service,

Jim Tokos
National President, Canadian Council of the Blind

Don't let your eye health become a game of red flags.

DR. MARTIN SPIRO
President, Canadian Association of Optometrists

During Vision Health Month, the Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) is committed to raising awareness about eye health and vision care. With an aging population, increased near-work, and a growing myopia epidemic, the integration of vision care into the healthcare routines for all age groups, from toddlers to seniors, is crucial. Several provincial associations of optometrists (New Brunswick Association of Optometrists, Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Optometrists, Nova Scotia Association of Optometrists, and The Prince Edward Island Association of Optometrists) and sponsors from the industry - Alcon and CooperVision - support this campaign.

Prevention is Key

More than 8 million Canadians are currently living with eye disease including Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD), Diabetic Retinopathy (DR), cataracts, and glaucoma. Uncorrected refractive error and corneal disease (specifically dry eye) are also major contributors to vision loss. Several factors can impact vision such as family history, age, environmental causes, lifestyle choices, and prolonged use of digital devices. The incidence of vision impairment is growing with many cases stemming from conditions that are treatable. In Canada, it is estimated that 90%[1] of vision loss can be treated or prevented if detected early.

Many people are not familiar with the role of optometrists, the importance of regular comprehensive eye exams, and often overlook them until they notice obvious symptoms. As many serious eye conditions do not present obvious symptoms initially, waiting for red flags can expose individuals to significant risks.

Eye Care is primary Health Care

"Optometrists are at the forefront of eye care, and as primary care health professionals, they support ensuring better health outcomes for all Canadians", says Dr. Martin Spiro, President of the Canadian Association of Optometrists. "They diagnose, treat, and help prevent diseases and disorders affecting the visual system (the eye and related structures). Comprehensive eye exams can also uncover underlying and life-threatening health issues, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, some cancers, brain tumour, and neurological conditions".

The CAO recommends[2] comprehensive eye exams for children starting at six to nine months, then again between the ages of two and five years, and annually thereafter to age 19. After 19, eye development stabilizes, allowing check-ups every two years for healthy adults with no known eye conditions. However, after age 65, yearly exams are recommended once again due to the increased incidence and risk of eye disease.

Eye health is not a game of red flags

The new "GetEyeWise" campaign highlights the importance of prevention and proactive steps Canadians can take when it comes to eye health. By showcasing relatable, everyday scenarios, the campaign raises awareness about the crucial role of regular eye exams in detecting potential issues early. It underscores optometrists as essential primary eye care providers, helping Canadians achieve better overall health outcomes. It will run throughout May on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest and Spotify in both English and French.

To find more about the CAO's new campaign, please visit: **opto.ca/avoid-the-red-flags**

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES OPTOMÉTRISTES

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[1] The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health: vision beyond 2020
Burton, Matthew J et al., The Lancet Global Health, Volume 9, Issue 4, e489 - e551
[2] CAO Position Statement on Eye Exam Frequency

ENVISIONING A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR ALL CANADIANS

YOUR LEGACY GIFT

The 1944 Legacy Society is an esteemed group of likeminded individuals who encourage members to include the Canadian Council of the Blind in their wills. By doing so, 1944 Legacy Society members are honouring their commitment to a better future for all Canadians. Members are recognized on a Digital Donor Wall and receive an exclusive pin.

Donations through wills are often tax beneficial to your estate and loved ones while offering you the opportunity to empower the blind community. Your legacy can live on through technology training, preventive eye health advocacy, and innovative research.

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EDITORIAL

Keeping Focused on Moving Forward Through the 2020's

PHOTO BY: **ANDRE MARTIN**

We're now halfway into the decade, and our advocacy work keeps progressing. Of course, we should be proud of the accomplishments we have made thus far, as members of the blind community, in improving our quality of life; and raising awareness to our abilities.

While we are out participating in technology and book clubs, meeting new friends or getting active; we are showing the world what we are capable of.

We still have challenges to face; a major challenge being the isolation felt by far too many members of our community. Canadians with vision impairments, to a significant degree, live outside of the national mainstream. Many are disconnected from the workforce, have little access to significant social and cultural information and have limited opportunities to participate in community life.

While Canada increasingly ensures the availability of means to overcome the barriers imposed by the 'built environment', those that limit access to information and knowledge, and social connection and interaction are rarely recognized, let alone addressed. The isolation created by these barriers dramatically reduces the will and the capacity to interact,to be informed, to participate and to be active.

Common barriers to the blind and vision impaired include: transportation, access to assistive technology, computer training, exclusion from social activiteies, exclusion from physical activities, communication and employment.

The CCB, a national, community-based organization of the blind with a history for over 80 years of hosting a range of programs from peer support, to sports and recreation, to general social activities, to computer training through our Get Together with Technology (GTT) program, is well positioned to reach out and lend a helping hand to isolated members of the community.

Within the CCB are members who, through their participation in its programs, have forged and maintained lives that in responding to the challenges and trauma of a loss of sight became more involved and active than at any othertime in their lives. These persons ski, sculpt, act, sail, cycle; participate in book and current affairs clubs; mentor and support others,organize activities for others; and develop networks of their peers. Not only have individuals become computer literate, but they have mentored others with assistive technology training as well.

As we continue to move forward into the future, we must encourage the rest of Canada to move forward along side us, helping us to reach out to isolated individuals. We are here, we are strong-willed, and we will continue to fight for our rights to live on an equal playing field as our sighted peers.

Mike Potvin
Editor

Making friends in China.

Honouring a Lifetime of Impact

Louise Gillis Named CCB Person of the Year

The Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB) is proud to announce that Louise Gillis has been named the 2025 Person of the Year, recognizing her decades of tireless advocacy, leadership, and service in advancing the lives of Canadians living with vision loss.

Louise, the former national president of the CCB, responded to the news with characteristic humility. “I was very surprised and grateful,” she said. “This is called ‘Person of the Year,’ but it really reflects years of work. I hope this award can help highlight some of the changes we’ve made over time, both for people living with blindness and in preventing avoidable vision loss.”

For those who know Louise, the recognition feels long overdue. Her journey with the CCB began in 1996, shortly after she experienced significant vision loss. Determined to remain active and contribute meaningfully to her community, she revitalized the Nova Scotia Division, building it from the ground up alongside mentor Christina Lewis. That early leadership led her to the national board, and eventually to the presidency, where her influence was felt coast to coast.

One of Louise’s proudest moments came in 2010 when she took on an advocacy campaign in Nova Scotia to secure public funding for Lucentis, a drug

Lousie and her guide dog.

critical to treating age-related macular degeneration. After direct appeals to government and a petition campaign, Louise's efforts led not only to the drug's approval but also to the creation of a local eye clinic, which is still operating in the community today.

Beyond Canadian borders, Louise brought her passion for eye care to international audiences. In collaboration with CCB's Mobile Eye Clinic, she traveled to China to assist in developing a rural eye care program. There, she helped screen over 1,000 children and seniors in under-resourced communities, an initiative inspired by the legacy of Canadian physician Dr. Norman Bethune.

Back home, Louise's legacy is just as tangible. Under her leadership, the Get Together with Technology (GTT) program was formed and she has recently played a pivotal role in resurrecting the CCB's Canadian Vision Impaired Curling Championship (CVICC), hosting the first post-COVID event in her hometown of Sydney, Nova Scotia. "Curling is about more than sport," Louise explains. "It's about community, movement, joy, and showing the world what blind and low-vision people can do."

Louise Gillis and Jim Tokos.

Louise has also served as a Canadian delegate to the World Blind Union, sitting on its Women's Committee to advocate for the rights of women and girls with disabilities, especially in underdeveloped countries. She continues to serve globally and nationally, promoting greater accessibility and equity through legislative frameworks like the Accessible Canada Act and provincial counterparts.

When asked what advice she would give to someone new to the CCB or facing vision loss, her message is simple: "There is life after sight loss. Whether it's technology, sport, advocacy, or simply belonging, the CCB has something for everyone, and the most important question anyone can ask is: 'How can I help?'"

From Nova Scotia to China; Parliament to curling rinks, Louise Gillis has left a remarkable legacy on the vision loss community. Her story is one of perseverance, courage, and conviction. A lifetime of service that exemplifies the very spirit of the CCB.

As we celebrate Louise as our 2025 Person of the Year, we honour not just a single achievement, but a career defined by compassion, tenacity, and the belief that no one should live with vision loss alone.

Congratulations, Louise! You've shown us all what exceptional leadership looks like.

Kelly MacDonald (right) sits with Jason Fayre.

Kelly MacDonald

A Lifelong Advocate, Storyteller, and Community Builder

This year's President's Award recipient, Kelly MacDonald, is a name synonymous with warmth, wit, and loyalty to Canada's blind and low vision community.

Over the years, Kelly has been a voice, both literally and figuratively, for advocacy, inclusion, and community empowerment. But his journey with the Canadian Council of the Blind began, as he humorously recalls, with being stopped on the street by a stranger who asked, "How come you're not a member of the CCB?" He jokes that he thought she was recruiting him for a street gang.

That fateful encounter sparked decades of involvement that has spanned local leadership, national conferences, theatrical initiatives, and a relentless passion for growing and expanding the Council. From his early connection with CCB London, to founding and revitalizing various chapters and initiatives, Kelly has always led with heart, humour, and humility.

A champion of community-based arts, Kelly advanced inclusive theatre troupes like the Glenvale Players Theatre Group and Out of Sight Productions, making space for blind and low vision performers to express themselves alongside sighted peers. Kelly has also reinvigorated events like Open Doors London, ensuring that people with vision loss could experience their city's cultural and historic spaces.

Perhaps his greatest contribution lies in mentorship and youth engagement. Kelly has long advocated for greater youth participation in CCB chapters, recognizing that the future of the organization depends on being responsive to the diverse needs of younger members. "We need to be more than a group that meets once a month for lunch," he says. "We need to be a welcome wagon; somewhere people feel less alone when their world is shifting."

Whether he's advocating for employment equity, organizing a theatre group, emceeing a coffee house, or rallying his local chapter with his signature sense of humour, Kelly embodies the values at the heart of the CCB.

It is with deep gratitude and admiration that we recognize Kelly MacDonald as the 2025 recipient of the President's Award.

White Cane Week in Sydney, Nova Scotia!

The 2025 Canadian Vision Impaired Curling Championship

CORRY STUIVE

Wow, what an incredible White Cane Week we celebrated in Sydney, Nova Scotia this year! Our Canadian Council of the Blind's (CCB) Sydney Curling Chapter hosted the Canadian Vision Impaired Curling Championship (CVICC) at the Sydney Curling Club (SCC).

The curlers and out-of-town guests arrived at various times from January 31st to February 2nd. Those arriving by air were met by the local welcoming committee at the airport and transported by volunteer drivers to the Simon Hotel.

Curlers from seven provinces, including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, participated in the event. The returning champions from Edmonton, Alberta were invited back as Team Canada to fill out the eighth spot.

The event began on Sunday, February 2nd, where all eight rinks (teams) had some practice time followed by a "meet and greet" social event to welcome all participants. There, the curlers were introduced to the event umpire and Draw Master, Yvon LeFort, who did an exceptional job throughout the event.

The competition began in earnest on the morning of Monday, February 3rd, and continued with two draws each day until Thursday, when only one game was needed to complete the round robin.

The afternoon of Thursday, February 6th, was reserved for potential tie-breakers. Since this was not required, some participants attended a meeting on the future of blind curling while others stayed at the rink for some extra coaching and/or practice.

On the morning of Friday, February 7th, it was playoff time. When the dust had settled, four rinks remained in the hunt for the three top honours. On Friday afternoon, the rink from Prince George, British Columbia played the home team from Sydney, Nova Scotia for the gold medal, while the rink from

Players from Team BC sweeping a curling rock

Championship trophy is awarded to Eric Rosen Rink from Prince George, BC.

Winnipeg, Manitoba faced Team Canada from Edmonton, Alberta for the bronze medal.

Congratulations go out to the Eric Rosen rink from Prince George, British Columbia who won the gold medal, the Louise Gillis rink from Sydney, Nova Scotia who won the silver medal, and the Natalie Morin rink, Team Canada from Edmonton, Alberta, who won the bronze medal.

Following the medal games, it was a hasty turnaround from the rink to the Pensioners Hall where everyone enjoyed a short windup banquet and awards presentation.

The majority of the curlers departed Sydney the following day. However, the guests from Alberta and Ontario were given an extra day of Cape Breton hospitality after their departing flight on Saturday was cancelled.

Despite the somewhat frosty weather conditions, the event and week turned out to be a great success. The organizing committee would like to publicly thank the following for their time, support, and generosity:

- The Sydney Curling Club for providing the facility for six days with a huge thank you to Benito DeLorenzo and his volunteers for amazing ice all week.
- Yvon LeFort, our umpire, draw master, and banquet MC extraordinaire, who did an outstanding job!
- John Marusiak, who did a great job arranging ground transportation for the curlers and guests to and from the airport, rink, and banquet, and even for a little shopping/sightseeing. Thanks, drivers!
- Thank you to all those who helped at the rink with the Meet and Greet pizza night, lunch distribution, and 50/50 sales.

A special thank you also goes out to:

- The management and staff at the Simon Hotel and their in-house "Trio" Restaurant for their kindness and hospitality.
- Lori Hysert (Edmonton) for the Braille menu and event schedule production.
- Olivia Nicholas (CCB National Staff) for the awesome social media updates and production of the event program.
- Carol Ann Marusiak, our event photographer.
- Jody Oakley Catering for providing the lunches at the rink between draws.
- The various Local and National media outlets for covering the event and giving the athletes the coverage they rightfully deserve.
- All the other sponsors and supporters who played a role in helping us with the event.

And last but not least, to the athletes, the curlers. You are the rock stars of this event. Thank you for your competitive spirit, participation, and dedication to the sport. Thank you for making this White Cane Week event a tremendous national success!

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Chef Adair Scott (left) and Mary Mammoliti host of *Dish with Mary*

Catch AMI's Original Award-Winning Content Anytime on Multiple Platforms

Looking for content created by and for the disability community in Canada? AMI has got you covered. From AMI-tv and AMI-audio to streaming services like AMI+, YouTube, and Roku, AMI makes it easier than ever to access award-winning content anytime.

Here's where you can find authentic storytelling, representation and positive portrayal of Canadians with disabilities.

AMI+

Visitors to AMI+ can access AMI's stable of audio, television and digital content created by and for the disability community. Additionally, visitors can utilize customizable accessibility settings for the blind and partially sighted community AMI serves.

Rigorous testing and consultation with our audience and members of Fable – a diverse community of accessibility professionals, each identifying as having a disability – have

Shaun Preece (left) and Steven Scott, co-hosts of *Double Tap*

resulted in an engaging, easy-to-use layout that puts AMI's content at the forefront.

Placed at the very top of the site and on every page of AMI+, users can select Accessibility Preferences and choose from eight levels of contrast, change the line spacing and the font. Once those selections are made, the website will remember those settings. AMI+ is fully compatible with assistive technology, including screen readers and magnifiers, and Windows, Apple and Android platforms and devices.

Want to take your AMI+ content on the go? Download the AMI+ app from the Apple and Android store.

Visit **AMIplus.ca** today!

AMI-tv

AMI-tv is a television channel that is broadcast nationally in English. From showcasing Canadian Paralympic athletes to accessible cooking tips and barrier-free travel tales, AMI-tv tells the stories that matter to the disability community. The channel also offers two specialized features, open described video and closed captioning, on all of its programming. The AMI-tv schedule is comprised of over 95 per cent Canadian content, and features AMI original programming made for and by the disability community

AMI-tv programming includes *Got Game*, *Fashion Dis*, *Crip Trip*, *We Were Broncos*, *Underdog Inc.*, *Postcards From*, *Our Community*, *Push*, *Game Changers*, and *One More Time*, along with award-winning series *Dish with Mary*, *The Squeaky Wheel: Canada*, and *By Hook or By Cook*.

Visit **AMI.ca/channels** to find AMI-tv in your area.

AMI-audio

AMI-audio is an accessible television channel and streaming service offering a variety of compelling stories and engaging original content to Canadians who are blind, partially sighted or otherwise print restricted.

AMI-audio airs a variety of live programs covering topics that are relevant to Canadians of all abilities, in addition to presenting feature articles from top Canadian and international publications. AMI-audio programs are available free to download as podcasts on all major podcasting apps and platforms.

Original programming available on AMI-audio include *AMI Today*, *Kelly & Company*, *Double Tap*, *The Globe & Mail Today*, *Voices of The Walrus*, *Maclean's Magazine*, and *The Washington Post.*

Visit **AMI.ca/channels** to find AMI-audio in your area.

YouTube

Join the AMI community on YouTube! With over 3,000 videos available on the platform, there is something for everyone. Watch full episodes of *Disrupt*, *Mind Your Own Business*, and *Dish with Mary*! Dig deep into video highlights from AMI's stable of original programs and video podcasts of *AMI Today*, *Kelly & Company*, *The Pulse*, and *Para Sport Nation*. Explore themed playlists around assistive technology; parenting; health and wellness; cooking, food and nutrition; comedy; sex and intimacy; and para sport, all through a disability lens.

Visit **YouTube.com/AccessibleMedia** now!

Roku

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Available with no subscription or sign-in required, AMI+ content includes documentaries and the series *Postcards From*, Canadian Screen Award winner *By Hook or*

The cast of *Vestiaires*

By Cook, *Adaptable Animals*, *Dish with Mary*, *Healthy at Home with Bobbi Janzen*, *Level Playing Field*, *Mind Your Own Business*, and *Our Community*.

Add the AMI+ app to your home screen directly from the Channel Store on your Roku streaming device.

AMI-télé

AMI-tv's French sister station, AMI-télé, offers a wide range of programming including comedies, documentaries and movies. Its flagship original program, *Ça me regarde*, is a weekly magazine-style program focused on disability, exploring everything from health and technology to personal finances and travel. AMI-télé has continued its commitment to producing original programming that is both interesting and pertinent to the francophone community and Canadians of all abilities. Original programs include *Ça ne se demande pas*, *Pas de panique*, *on cuisine!*, *Style sur mesure* and the recent hit comedy *Vestiaires*, AMI's first-ever scripted series.

Visit **AMI-tele.ca/comment-nous-capter** to find AMI-télé in your area.

AMI.ca has a new look! Earlier this year, AMI.ca was re-branded as a corporate website. Visitors to the new **AMI.ca** will find information about careers available at AMI, the annual AMI Scholarship, AMI-tv and AMI-audio schedules, described video guide, and popular recipes from *Dish with Mary* and *Four Senses*.

Keep up to date on everything going on at AMI and in the community we serve by signing up for the AMI newsletter at **ami.ca/newsletter** and have it delivered straight to your inbox.

Want to have input into the future of programming at AMI? Join our Research Panel at **ami.ca/researchpanel.**

AMI-audio, AMI-tv, and AMI-télé are all available as part of basic digital packages offered by most television providers across the country. If you have basic cable, you have access to AMI.

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Canadian Council of the Blind

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Seeing the Future:

Canadians Embrace Vision Health as a Priority – A Look at Awareness, Innovation, and What Comes Next

Canadians are increasingly informed and engaged when it comes to their eye health. A recent national survey by the Canadian Ophthalmological Society reveals a promising shift: Canadians understand the importance of vision care and are ready to champion progress in education, access, and innovation.

Canadians overwhelmingly value access to leading-edge technologies

Innovation in Vision Care: A Shared Priority

Canadians overwhelmingly value access to leading-edge vision care technologies—and are eager to see these advancements become more widely available.

- **92% agree** that access to innovation in eye care is important.
- **Three in four Canadians** feel confident in their current access to innovations, a strong foundation to build upon.

This positive outlook reinforces the importance of continued investment in research, technology and innovation, and system-wide improvements.

Climate and Vision Health: A New Awareness

As environmental conditions evolve, Canadians are becoming more aware of how climate can affect eye health.

- **38% report** that factors such as UV exposure, wildfire smoke, and cold winds have impacted their vision in the past year.

This growing awareness is a key opportunity to promote proactive eye protection and public education campaigns that help individuals safeguard their sight in changing environments.

Protecting Young Eyes in Today's Digital World

Canadians are clearly attuned to the impact of screen time on children's vision—a sign of strong engagement in preventive care.

82% express concern about screen exposure in young people.

This concern supports a broader movement toward digital wellness, regular eye exams, and eye-friendly routines for kids.

Families are well-positioned to make informed choices that help preserve healthy vision from an early age.

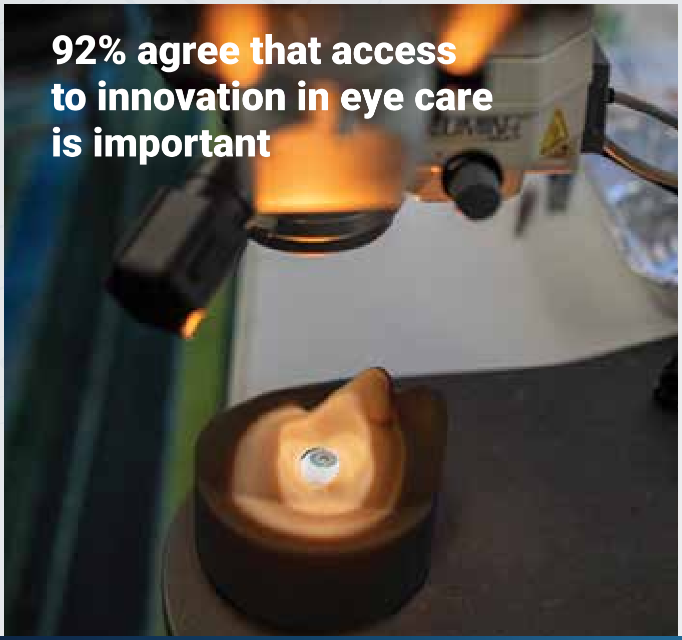
A Vision for the Future

Canadians are becoming more engaged, informed, and optimistic about their eye health. As public understanding grows and new technologies become more accessible, there is clear momentum toward a healthier future for all.

By supporting:

- ✓ **expanded education initiatives**
- ✓ **access to innovations**
- ✓ **continued policy advocacy**

...the vision health community is well-positioned to meet Canadians' needs and ensure strong, clear sight for generations to come.



92% agree that access to innovation in eye care is important

82% express concern about screen exposure in young people

COS plays a pivotal role in ensuring excellence in eye care across Canada. With its members at the forefront of vision care as eye physicians and surgeons, the COS works to assist them to provide exemplary eye care. Collaborating with allies in eye health care and government, the Society seeks to improve vision health policy and initiatives.

Through strategic alliances and dedicated advocacy efforts, the COS aims to elevate awareness, mobilize resources, to prevent blindness, preserve vision, and improve overall eye health. Our mission underscores the importance of collective action and cooperation in safeguarding the precious gift of sight for all Canadians.

Canadian Ophthalmological Society | Société canadienne d'ophtalmologie

EYE PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS OF CANADA | MÉDECINS ET CHIRURGIENS OPHTALMOLOGISTES DU CANADA

cos-sco.ca

A Vision for Well-being

VLRC's Behavioural Health Services (BHS) Pilot Project

Dr. Claire Sira, Registered Psychologist

Anxiety decreased, and client satisfaction improved; Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada's (VLRC) pilot project offers a glimpse into what is possible.

Recognizing the profound impact of vision loss on our clients' emotional and mental well-being, VLRC serves a diverse clientele, from infants to centenarians. We are putting Clients First with innovative solutions like our Behavioural Health Services (BHS) Pilot Project.

Understanding the client's experience

At VLRC, we genuinely understand the unique challenges that our clients encounter. As a national non-profit health care organization, we provide accessible rehabilitation for Canadians experiencing vision loss.

Anxiety and depression challenge mental health after vision loss; therefore, professionals must understand the impact on emotional well-being and rehabilitation participation. Unfortunately, isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these mental health concerns, emphasizing the urgency for targeted support.

VLRC's integrated solution

Recognizing the need for consistent and standardized mental health support for clients, VLRC dedicated a year to laying the foundation for a targeted solution.

This initiative launched a 12-month pilot program in British Columbia in 2023. Funded by BC's Provincial Health Services Authority, it supported 164 clients through two Registered Psychologists, Dr. Claire Sira and Dr. Jennifer Upshaw, who allocated one day weekly for VLRC client appointments.

Dr. Sira recently took some time to share her perspectives about the pilot program.

How VLRC's Behavioural Health Specialists (BHS) made a difference for clients

VLRC: As some clients expressed their feelings about the pilot, what does this suggest about this population's ongoing mental health support needs?

Dr. Claire Sira: The majority of clients expressed deep gratitude for our support. Common problems we discussed ranged from working with their employers to accessing accommodations, to managing their anxiety and the changes in their relationships as a result of their vision loss. Because the BHS pilot ran for a limited time, we did not expect to "solve" these problems by the end of the pilot. So, most clients would have preferred more sessions.

As a registered psychologist, what common misconceptions do people have about the mental health of individuals with sight loss?

Sighted people without exposure to individuals with sight loss often assume those with sight loss are hopeless and depressed.

Sometimes, when sighted people see these individuals functioning relatively unencumbered, they assume these individuals must be exceptional – that they are an "inspiration." They don't recognize the many barriers that interfere with daily life, and if these barriers were removed, there would be more people with sight loss working and living their lives the way they want to.

Could you elaborate on customizing mental health support for congenital versus acute cases?

When someone has congenital vision loss, the losses are spread out as they "grow into them." For example, a child in grade 6 is excluded from joining the school hockey team. At 16, they can't get a driving licence like their friends. The losses are spread over time. These clients may benefit from intermittent mental health support available to them for short periods at critical periods in their lives.

Acute vision loss can range from a mild inconvenience (if it is short-lived) to a catastrophic and life-changing disability. One may face

Supporting every step: VLRC's holistic approach, including the Behavioural Health Services (BHS) Pilot Project, fosters resilience and empowers clients to maintain their independence.

multiple simultaneous losses - job, driving, home responsibilities, and personal relationships - while adapting to a new visual impairment. The risk of depression and suicidal ideation is much higher in this group. These clients benefit from more intensive support in the year post-injury/loss, with decreasing needs over time

What key factors contribute to resilience and positive mental health outcomes for individuals adapting to or living with vision loss?

Clients who do well with rehabilitation are typically curious about how they can improve their lives. With a little encouragement, they consider ways to improve their situation.

Other clients with good outcomes were coping well prior to their loss of vision. They did not have a significant history of mental illness. This helps them adapt to their vision loss and to learn rehabilitation techniques and strategies to live as fully as possible.

Many clients who do well in rehab have an internal resilience or "grit." After the initial shock of the loss, they focus on what they must do. These clients never lose hope as they have a strong internal locus of control. That is, they firmly believe they can improve their circumstances through their actions.

Lastly, clients who succeed typically have access to family, friends, or other instrumental support for their daily needs. After a major loss of vision, it's hard to engage in rehabilitation activities if you are struggling to get your basic needs met.

VLRC staff feedback shows BHS improved efficiency, comfort in mental health discussions, and client well-being. How did you collaborate with VLRC specialists and therapists?

As BHS psychologists, we attended meetings with the specialists, encouraging them to present challenging cases for discussion. For very challenging situations, we arranged debriefing meetings with relevant specialists to share their feelings about a particular client's outcome. We also offered the VLRC specialists our team-based support.

What did you enjoy about working with VLRC on this pilot?

It is a privilege to be invited to support people when grappling with one of the hardest things in their lives.

I thoroughly enjoyed collaborating with the VLRC leadership team as they utilized their resources to address the mental health needs of VLRC clients. I loved meeting the different specialists and staff, especially those with vision loss themselves, as they generously helped me understand some of the nuanced challenges I might not have considered. Lastly, my heart is in rehabilitation psychology, so I loved offering services to VLRC clients in a health care setting where they didn't have to worry about how they would pay for their care.

What are your hopes for future mental health support in the vision loss sector based on your experience in this pilot?

I hope that individuals can access timely mental health support from providers knowledgeable about vision loss, its impact on their identities and their ability to engage in rehabilitation activities. I believe that with targeted mental health support, VLRC clients will navigate their rehabilitation journey confidently and without fear.

Given the stigma attached to mental health services, integrated offerings such as the VLRC's BHS are far more accessible for clients compared to referrals to external mental health providers. Research shows that when physicians refer clients to external mental health providers, clients follow through only 10% of the time.

I hope that by normalizing the inclusion of a mental health provider as part of the rehabilitation team, it will reduce the stigma of talking about our mental health needs.

A Seat at the Table for the Vision Loss Community

BY AMANDA LLOY

Why Representation Matters

Could you imagine navigating a world that isn't designed for you? Millions of Canadians with vision loss face this challenge daily – whether it's accessing healthcare, finding employment, or moving through public spaces. Yet, when decisions are made that affect their lives, they're often left out of the conversation.

The Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB) has always worked to change that. Unlike many organizations that advocate for the blind and partially sighted community, the CCB is the community. Its National Board is composed entirely of blind or low-vision individuals from across Canada, and its local chapters create a space where members support one another.

This perspective makes the CCB a powerful advocate. When the organization says it is the "Voice of the Blind," it means just that – ensuring those with lived experience speak on the policies and changes that directly impact their lives.

Bill C-284: A Milestone for Eye Care in Canada

An important moment for the vision loss community was passing Bill C-284, the National Eye Care Strategy, to Health Canada. This legislation aims to improve millions of Canadians' access to essential eye care services.

This bill could mean earlier diagnoses, more affordable treatments, and better rehabilitation services for many with eye diseases and vision loss. While medical eye care is critical to vision loss, the CCB recognizes that it's only one piece of the puzzle.

Beyond Healthcare: A Bigger Picture

The social model of disability – a concept essential to CCB's advocacy – acknowledges that the most significant challenges faced by people with vision loss aren't always medical. Environmental, systemic, and societal barriers – such as inaccessible workplaces, lack of public transportation options, lack of assistive device support and social exclusion – create significant obstacles to one's autonomy. As a result, these challenges directly affect a person with vision loss and their well-being, limiting their opportunities for social participation.

Policies must go beyond healthcare to truly support the vision loss community. The CCB encourages the address of employment opportunities, accessibility, device funding, and social inclusion.

From "Nothing About Us, Without Us" to "Nothing Without Us"

For years, many disability communities have been using the phrase "Nothing about us, without us" – a call for people with disabilities to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. However, according to CCB National Board Vice-President Leslie Yee, that phrase is evolving.

> *"Nothing about us, without us" is becoming "Nothing without us."*
>
> – Leslie Yee, National Vice-President of the Canadian Council of the Blind.

This shift in language is more than symbolic. It shows that individuals with vision loss aren't just there to be consulted about disability policies – they also bring expertise that benefits society.

When people with lived experience have a seat at the table, from the earliest stages of policy development to final implementation, policies become more inclusive, equitable, and effective. Their perspectives ensure decisions are made with a fundamental understanding of the experiences of those with vision loss.

The Path Forward

The passing of Bill C-284 is a step in the right direction, but actual progress comes when inclusion is the norm, not the exception. The CCB continues to advocate for systemic changes – ensuring that people with vision loss have a voice in shaping a society that works *for everyone*.

When the voices of those most affected are heard, the result isn't just better policies – it's a better world.

Fighting Blindness Canada Sets Bold Vision Amid Shifting Global and National Landscape

FIGHTING BLINDNESS CANADA

In an increasingly uncertain global research climate, the future of vision science faces mounting pressure. Potential U.S. funding cutbacks and tariffs on research materials threaten international collaborations and scientific progress – raising alarms for Canadian researchers reliant on cross-border partnerships and shared innovation. In response, Canadian organizations like Fighting Blindness Canada (FBC) are doubling down on efforts to protect and propel domestic vision research forward.

Nationally, momentum is building. In late 2024, Parliament passed Bill C-284, the National Strategy for Eye Care Act, establishing a framework to strengthen access to eye care, invest in cutting-edge research, and promote education on vision health.

It's against this backdrop that FBC has launched its bold new five-year strategic plan, *Raising Our Sights: Vision 2030*. The strategy outlines a comprehensive roadmap to advance research, connect communities, and empower individuals living with vision loss.

At the heart of the plan is a renewed commitment to funding world-class research aimed at preventing blindness and restoring sight. By supporting innovative science and fostering collaboration, FBC intends to push the boundaries of what's possible in vision health. Equally important is the organization's focus on education – becoming a go-to source for accurate information on eye diseases, treatments and the latest research development.

Vision 2030 is anchored by three strategic themes:

- **Expanding Community Connections:** FBC will adopt a community- and donor-centered approach to build trusted and sustainable relationships in the vision loss community, attracting more people who will benefit from our high-value programs
- **Enhancing Fundraising & Brand Positioning:** By refining its brand, FBC aims to secure new investment in research and community programs, ensuring sustained momentum toward its mission.
- **Scaling for Greater Impact:** The organization plans to strengthen its internal infrastructure – building the systems, talent, and culture required to scale its success and expand its impact across the vision loss spectrum.

FBC's strategy not only echoes the goals of Canada's national eye care strategy but also sends a clear message: in the face of global uncertainty, Canada is ready to take the lead.

Advocacy Training Empowers CCB Leaders

Attendees of the training workshop.

The workshop guide.

A workshop presentation.

From April 23–25, members of the CCB Board of Directors attended an insightful advocacy training workshop designed to strengthen their ability to advocate effectively for the vision loss community. Held at the Ottawa Embassy Hotel, the workshop featured engaging sessions by experts Gail Attara and Dr. Jutta Treviranus. Participants explored key topics including effective advocacy, relationship-building, understanding public reimbursement systems, navigating government relations, and strategies for patient advocacy.

Feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing how valuable and practical the training was. The skills and insights gained from this workshop will play a crucial role as we continue to advance the development of a national eye care strategy.

We extend our sincere gratitude to Astellas Pharma Inc. and Hoffmann-La Roche Limited for their generous support, making this important training possible. Their continued commitment significantly impacts the vision loss community.

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Roche

Blind Skateboarder Fundraises to Donate iPads to Visually Impaired Youth

MICHELLE GOMEZ, CBC NEWS

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY **BRETT DEVLOO**

Brent Devloo says his iPad is the reason he was able to graduate high school after he suddenly became blind in the 11th grade.

Now, the Langley resident is fundraising to give iPads to other visually impaired youth.

Devloo was 16 when he lost his vision one day in history class in 2011. He was eventually diagnosed with a rare DNA mutation called Leber hereditary optic neuropathy, which can cause sudden vision loss.

He said his mom's friends donated an iPad to him at the time. The built-in screen-reading technology called Voiceover helped him do his homework.

"It's the reason I finished school because I was able to type and read and do everything quickly without learning a whole computer," he said.

He says the technology also helped him start his clothing line, "The Blind Kid." He uses the funds from it to purchase iPads for other blind kids.

So far, Devloo has given away five iPads and says he has just about enough money for another one.

He hopes to inspire kids who become blind to not only continue their schooling but to return to their passions as soon as they can.

For him, it was skateboarding – a sport he considered challenging even when he still had his sight.

But instead of viewing it as a challenge, Devloo said he found it freeing.

"If I'm at a skatepark, I've got to start at the corner and just go by feeling ... and eventually build up enough commitment and bravery," he said.

"I can help kids with school and connect them to creativity, and just because I knew how much it helped me."

Brett Devloo riding his board in a skate park bowl.

Devloo also pursued another passion – creating music – using his iPad, an endeavour that put him on Stevie Wonder's radar and landed him the opportunity to record music with Wonder's producer.

Devloo said becoming blind made him grow up quickly, and he hopes his gifts can make that process a little easier for others.

"I can help kids with school and connect them to creativity, and just because I knew how much it helped me," said Devloo.

Mike Faux, owner of the indoor HMI Skatepark in Hope and a friend of Devloo, is working with Devloo to create a documentary about his experience as a blind skateboarder.

The two became friends when Devloo started visiting Faux's skatepark.

"Every time I see Brett out there, it just blows my mind," said Faux, who is a skateboarding instructor and has taught Olympians in the past.

"This documentary is going to show that to people, and it's going to inspire them that nothing can stop you."

Devloo hopes the documentary will inspire those who find themselves in the situation he was in. And his message to those youth?

"Let it piss you off when people tell you that you can't do something."

Saskatoon Grade 12 Student's Affordable Braille Device Receives National Accolades

DARLA PONACE, CBC NEWS

PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY **JOTI GOKERAJU**

A Grade 12 student at Walter Murray Collegiate in Saskatoon is being recognized for creating an innovative device to help blind and deaf people communicate.

Joti Gokeraju said he was inspired after visiting his grandfather in India. "My grandpa is a very jovial person. He likes to call a lot and talk to us a lot. But when I went there, I was surprised to see him not as talkative, and I found out it was because he was slowly losing his hearing," Gokeraju said.

He started thinking of what it would be like if he not only lost his hearing, but his eyesight as well.

"This would mean we would lose the ability to communicate with him completely," he said. "This was a really scary reality."

Once he got back to Canada, Gokeraju started researching blind and deaf resources, and found that there are around 160 million people who are either visually impaired or hearing impaired. He wanted to do something to help.

"I really only started working on it in 2023," he said.

He gives a lot of credit to his teachers, who let him work on parts of the invention as class projects. He said he explained to his teachers how passionate he was about the idea.

"They gave me the green light. So, I went ahead," he said. "After school I would spend a few hours on it every day, and that went on for about a year until I could actually finish my prototype."

The prototype for his braille device was more cost-effective than other devices on the market – the display costs $99 instead of several thousand.

All the translations in Gokeraju's device are automated. "In a normal system, you'll need someone who already knows how to convert English to Braille in order to talk to a deaf and blind person," he said. "But in this system I can just record myself in English or French and all of that translation is done automatically."

Gokeraju has already won an engineering innovation award and a gold medal at a national science fair for his work.

He said he's happy to be recognized, but the project out there is more important to him.

Joti Gokeraju holding a prototype of the braille device he invented.

"I want to be able to give this to every deaf and blind person around the world. It's great to get the word out there because that really helps in the process," he said.

"When you don't have access to resources, it becomes very difficult for you to actually interact in society and have normal conversations," he said.

Gokeraju said he is currently working on a provisional patent application and hopes to have the device patented soon.

Joti Gokeraju's TouchTalk prototype.

Did Your Kid Get Glasses Post-Pandemic? Study Says Myopia Rates are Soaring Around the World

MIKE CRAWLEY, CBC NEWS

New research shows the rate of myopia among children and teens worldwide has tripled over the past three decades, with a particularly steep increase noted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

A paper in the British Journal of Ophthalmology, which reviewed 276 studies published to June 2023 from around the world, concluded that more than one in three of all children and teens are nearsighted, triple what it was in 1990.

"Emerging evidence suggests a potential association between the pandemic and accelerated vision deterioration among young adults," states the report, published in September.

The authors forecast that if the current trends continue, about 740 million children and teens – more than half globally – will be myopic by 2050.

The paper estimates the current rate of myopia among children in Canada at roughly 25 per cent. That number is lower than the international average but it's still a significant increase from the prevalence of 17.5 per cent, concluded by University of Waterloo researchers in a paper published in early 2018.

"Myopia has increased dramatically during the period of COVID," said Lisa Christian, associate director of clinical practice at the University of Waterloo School of Optometry.

Christian said the research suggests the trends are linked to kids spending more time indoors doing what's known as "near work," such as looking at books, computers or phone screens. The strain this puts on the eye muscles can cause myopia.

"When we're indoors, we're focused on near work most of the time, we're looking at one spot," Christian told CBC News in an interview. "When we're outside, we're looking far away, so we're relaxing our eyes."

Benefits of being outside

Successive studies have shown how myopia is related to too little time outdoors in childhood.

Aidan Chen, 8, gets an eye exam from an optometry student at the Waterloo Eye Clinic. Photo by Turgut Yeter, CBC.

The 2018 University of Waterloo study, which focused on children aged six to 13, found that one additional hour of outdoor time per week could lower the child's odds of developing myopia by 14 per cent. "Time spent outdoors was the only child activity to have a significant impact on myopia," it stated.

Similar conclusions were reached by other research teams. A 2021 study from Australia found that spending less time outdoors during childhood was associated with a higher risk of myopia in young adulthood, while a 2022 study from Germany found myopia in children was significantly associated with less frequent outdoor activity.

According to Christian, the research suggests that children should spend one to two hours per day outdoors to protect their eyes against the onset of myopia. And that time does not need to be consecutive – shorter periods of outdoor activity, like walking to school, being outside at recess and lunchtime, and playing outdoors after school all add up.

Being outdoors not only provides eye muscles with a needed break from near work, there is also evidence that the quality and intensity of outdoor light can protect against myopia, said Dr. Asim Ali, ophthalmologist-in-chief at SickKids Hospital in Toronto.

"Outdoors in sunshine or even on an overcast day, the lighting is much brighter than what we can do indoors," he said in an interview.

The reasons behind the increased prevalence of myopia are "definitely more than just screens," Ali added. He says when children are indoors, it's important to provide bright light to ease the strain on the eyes.

A study published in January 2024 looked at the increase of screen use among school-age children and teens between 2018 and 2021 — that is, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020. Its findings noted that the proportion of youngsters using screens in excess of four hours per day jumped significantly in 2020 and remained high.

Problem is bigger than glasses

Dr. Stephanie Dotchin, a pediatric and adult ophthalmologist in Toronto, says myopia should not be dismissed as a trivial matter that can simply be corrected with glasses.

"As your prescription gets bigger and bigger, you are at risk in your lifetime of other health issues related to the eye," Dotchin said.

She says people with severe myopia — a prescription of -6.00 or higher — have an increased risk of developing cataracts at an early age, as well as glaucoma and retinal tears.

Being outdoors not only provides eye muscles with a needed break from near work, there is also evidence that the quality and intensity of outdoor light can protect against myopia.

All of these can result in permanent vision loss, she said.

"There is now a push in North America to treat [myopia] not as just a condition but as a disease because of the increasing prevalence," Dotchin said.

Is your child's eyesight getting worse? It could be due to online learning, experts say. She advises parents to encourage their kids to take frequent breaks when they are inside doing near work with their eyes, such as reading, homework or looking at a screen.

The Canadian Association of Optometrists recommends children have at least one eye exam before they start school, and have their vision checked annually from age six onward.

Dr. Asim Ali, ophthalmologist-in-chief at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Photo by Turgut Yeter, CBC.

Dr. Stephanie Dotchin (right) is a pediatric and adult ophthalmologist in Calgary, and a member of the Canadian Ophthalmology Society. Photo by Monty Kruger, CBC.

Recognizing the signs early:

Liz Tully's Journey with AMD

How long have you been diagnosed with AMD?

I have been aware of having AMD for about 25 years and I have had wet AMD for about 9 years. But even before my diagnosis, I knew much earlier that I might get it, because when I was in my early 40s, I knew that 3 of my family members had it.

At first, the vision changes were so gradual that I naturally adapted without realizing it. It wasn't until I developed the advanced form, wet AMD, that I really started noticing the differences.

Looking back, what were some of these vision changes you dismissed or overlooked at very initial stages?

Early on, I had difficulty seeing when moving from a light to a dark environment. I first noticed this when I went into a movie theatre after the movie had started. I couldn't find any vacant seats, so I walked along the row, found one that looked empty and sat down, only to realize someone was sitting there. Fortunately, we both had a good sense of humour. But, at that time, it didn't occur to me that it could be my AMD, but now I recognize it as one of the first symptoms. I also remember having trouble reading under poor lighting conditions. The lines would sometimes merge, or individual letters would appear in the wrong places. I'd have to blink really hard to get the lines to settle down.

Another issue I had was when I was out walking. Sometimes I'd suddenly fall, and I now realize it was because I was losing my depth perception and contrast sensitivity. Even performing tasks like cutting a piece of paper, I'd end up cutting into thin air above or below it. For me, these changes were so gradual and slow that I didn't even realize I was losing these skills.

How did knowing about your potential risk for AMD impact your approach to managing the condition and your daily life?

That knowledge was hugely important to me and that is why I strongly believe that people should have the opportunity to know if AMD could be in their future—if they wish to know. Over time, through my own experiences, conversations with others, and my research on AMD, I have gradually come to believe that there is a general belief in the ophthalmology world: that if a condition like AMD cannot be treated or cured, it should not be discussed with patients, because the knowledge could be too unsettling.

But for me, it's the opposite—I'm much better at dealing with what I know rather than the unknown. I'm independent and a planner by nature, and you can't plan for something big like this without knowing about it. I understand that not everyone wants to know, but for those who do, I think testing can be incredibly helpful. It allowed me to be proactive—like noticing my loss of depth perception and contrast sensitivity—and make adjustments, like picking up my feet more when walking.

How did you react when you were told your condition had progressed to wet AMD?

At the time, I knew I had early/moderate AMD, so hearing the words was not the shock that it could have been. The news was still devastating, though—and all I could really handle that day. Even though I had long known this was a possibility, I was overwhelmed and anxious about the ongoing impact the disease could have on my life and those around me. It was incredibly important for me to speak with my doctor, to understand what to expect and how we could move forward together.

What would you say to someone that might be ignoring the early signs of vision change?

Ignoring it doesn't mean it won't happen! It just means you will be less prepared than you could have otherwise been if you develop a serious eye condition like AMD, especially wet AMD.

AMD doesn't wait. Neither should you.
If something feels off, get your eyes checked.

Early detection can help protect your vision.
Schedule an eye exam today.

Learn how to live with and manage AMD

Scan this QR code or visit fightingblindness.ca to access helpful resources and tips on coping with vision changes in AMD.

Testimony presented is from a real patient recounting their personal experience with AMD. This individual has provided their consent to share their story for the purpose of bringing awareness to AMD. Please note that individual experiences with AMD may vary. This is intended for general informational and educational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. For medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment, please consult a healthcare professional. This advertisement is unbranded and does not endorse or promote any specific medical treatments or products.

BAYER

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the **leading cause of vision loss** in people over the age of 55, **affecting ~2.5 million Canadians**

In AMD, your central vision is affected, making it harder to do activities like reading, driving, and distinguishing faces.

AMD is a progressive disease, which means that it gets worse over time.

There are three stages of AMD based on the number of drusen on the retina. Drusen are tiny yellow or white spots made up of proteins and fatty substances that result in central vision loss.

AMD typically begins as dry AMD and can progress to wet AMD at any stage

EARLY STAGE

DRY AMD

Low quantity of drusen.

May not show any symptoms.

INTERMEDIATE STAGE

DRY AMD

The quantity of drusen is higher than it was in the early stage.

Mild blurriness in central vision or trouble seeing in low lighting.

ADVANCED STAGE

DRY AMD **WET AMD**

The quantity of drusen is quite high.

DRY AMD

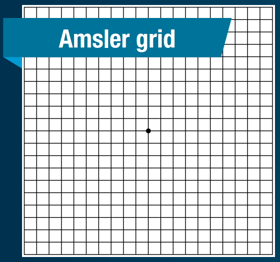
Marked distortion of straight lines, difficulty reading and driving at night, gradual loss of central vision, or dark, blurry areas in the center of vision.

WET AMD

A gradual or sudden loss of central vision, or dark, blurry areas in the center of vision.

What is the difference between dry and wet AMD?

Dry AMD	Wet AMD
• Characterized by gradual thinning and breakdown of the macula, the center of the retina that is responsible for detailed central vision • Central vision loss tends to occur more slowly	• Caused by leaky blood vessels that damage the macula • Sudden onset with more rapid and significant central vision loss



Did you know?

- **Risk factors** for AMD include older **age**, **smoking**, extensive **UV light** exposure, **family history** of AMD and **cardiovascular disease**
- Wet AMD accounts for **10% – 20%** of AMD cases
- **80% – 90%** of severe cases of AMD-related vision loss are caused by wet AMD
- Once AMD is present in one eye, there is an **increased chance** of it developing in the other eye
- **Self-monitoring** for AMD-related vision changes can be done at home using an **Amsler grid**

Keep healthy vision in focus: visit your doctor for a routine eye exam†

Learn how to live with and manage AMD

Scan this QR code or visit fightingblindness.ca to access helpful resources and tips on coping with vision changes in AMD

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† Adults without eye conditions aged 40 – 64 should have routine eye exams every 2 years. Adults aged 65 years or older should have an annual eye exam.

Guide Dog Owner Says Louie May be her Last Unless Behaviour of ‘Service Dogs’ Changes

ANDREW LUPTON, CBC NEWS

PHOTO BY **ANDREW LUPTON**

When Avril Rinn goes out for a walk, her Labrador retriever Louie leads the way.

Rinn, of London, Ont., is legally blind and Louie is her trusty guide dog, the second one she’s owned.

As he guides Rinn along the sidewalk, onto the bus or down the grocery store aisle, Louie doesn’t bark, beg or jump up on seats. He does his best to ignore other dogs because he’s focused and trained for the task at hand: Guiding Rinn around any dangers in her path.

And while Rinn loves Louie and his ability to allow her to move around in freedom and safety, she’s leaning toward not getting another guide dog after he’s gone. That’s because increasingly when she and Louie are in stores, restaurants and other indoor public spaces, Rinn is often not the only person with a dog, and lately she hasn’t been welcome with Louie.

“There’s an industry out there that provides very official looking service dog vests and even service dog ID cards,” said Rinn. “And people use them to get access to places.”

In addition to accredited guide dogs for the visually impaired, like Louie, there are other dogs that fall into the more general categories of “service dogs,” “support dogs” or “comfort dogs.”

These dogs help their owners cope in public with any number of challenges and disabilities, including non-apparent conditions such as autism, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

However, the difference between Louie and some of the service dogs Rinn encounters becomes apparent immediately.

“They really don’t have the right training or temperament to be in public,” she said. “They misbehave, they growl, and their humans let them do things that a guide dog handler never would. It happens everywhere now.”

Louie spent almost two years working with Leader Dogs for the Blind, a Michigan-based guide dog training program accredited by the International Guide Dog Federation. He was bred for the job and there was an extensive matching process before he was placed with Rinn.

In Canada, organizations such as the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) and the Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guides have training programs with the same accreditation as the organization that trained Louie.

It’s a rigorous regime and many dogs don’t make the cut.

Rinn said service dogs that don’t behave well in public create challenges for owners with accredited service and guide dogs.

Business owners are sometimes not sure about which dogs they should allow inside. Dogs that misbehave are sometimes lumped together with those that don’t, which can make business owners skeptical.

Avril Rinn along with her guide dog, Louie.

PHOTO BY **ANDREW LUPTON**

> “What I’d really like is more awareness. I would like people who are just bringing their dog with them for convenience or because they enjoy having it around to think twice about it.”

It’s a situation Rinn and others say is leading to more limits to access public spaces.

“I am challenged far more today than I ever was in the past,” said Rinn.

Diane Bergeron is president of CNIB Guide Dogs, a charitable organization that trains accredited guide dogs in Canada. She’s also legally blind and has used a guide dog for 40 years.

Bergeron said almost anyone can claim their dog as a “service” or “comfort” dog, but according to Ontario’s legislation, only dogs with training can qualify as a “service animal”. The act says “comfort animals” do not require training, and therefore service providers are not required to allow the animal on the premises.

The act does not outline what constitutes training.

“It gives a bad reputation to service dogs or guide dogs who meet the high standard,” she said.

Both Bergeron and Rinn have had other dogs approach theirs in public, distracting them from the main task of keeping their owners safe.

“It actually puts us at risk,” said Bergeron.

Both Bergeron and Rinn believe the number of people who bring dogs into public places has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It’s become a global concern,” said Chris Diefenthaler, executive director of Assistance Dogs International, a coalition of non-profit organizations that raise, train and place assistance dogs. “We’ve got member organizations around the world. They’re all reporting issues with their graduates that are experiencing difficulties with encountering dogs that are not properly trained to be out in public as an assistance dog.”

Diefenthaler said that because it’s so difficult to craft legislation to suit every situation, the best solution is a reliance on behaviour standards. Also, business owners need to have a clear right to ask owners with disruptive dogs to leave or to deny them entry.

“If dogs are being disruptive out in public such as lunging, approaching people, interacting with other dogs, then they are truly not providing an assistance to the people they’ve been placed with,” she said. “Their owners may not realize the impact that they are having on the individual that has a trained assistance dog.”

Diefenthaler, Bergeron and Rinn all said they’re not out to deny access to a dog to anyone who relies on them for comfort or healing. They just want people to know that when a dog misbehaves in public, it has the potential to reverse hard-won rights to allow visually impaired people access to public spaces.

“What I’d really like is more awareness,” said Rinn. “I would like people who are just bringing their dog with them for convenience or because they enjoy having it around to think twice about it.”

Not all ‘helper’ dogs are service dogs.

Pets can be of great comfort for some people but getting them a vest does not make them a service dog. Avril Rinn is visually impaired and has a guide dog who went through rigorous training. Rinn finds the proliferation of ‘service’ animals is changing how she is received with her genuine guide dog.


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Blind Musicians and Teachers Communicate Through Vibration Using Canadian-Made Device

KATIE GELEFF, CBC NEWS

A PhD student in Ottawa has developed a device that allows blind and low-vision students to feel music cues, replacing the need to see them.

Instead of having to follow a conductor's baton, or a teacher's hand gestures during a lesson, music learners can receive instruction through a vibration in their right leg sent by the Tap-Tap device.

Leon Lu, the information technology PhD student at Carleton University behind the idea, says the wearable device is easy to use and cheap to make.

"Imagine, kind of like a Morse code, but vibration," Lu told As It Happens host Nil Köksal. "What's really cool about that is that you can get real-time communication happening through discreet methods."

"The student can continue playing and they don't have to stop and actually discuss [the instruction], but they can still be in that moment and in flow."

A violin teacher can tap her heels together to send a real-time message to her student about rhythm and tempo. The device they're using, called the tap-tap, was created by Carleton PhD student Leon Lu in an effort to transform the learning experience for blind and low-vision musicians.

The Tap-Tap device doesn't come with a set communication code or language. That language is set by the participants, which Lu says is both a limitation and advantage of the device.

Piano teacher Nora Bartosik echoes that.

Bartosik is a faculty member at Manhattan's Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School, a school for blind and low-vision students, which teamed up with Lu to test the prototype and provide his team with weekly feedback about the device.

She used the Tap-Tap device with one of her piano students for about two months earlier this year and says there was a learning curve.

"It kind of feels like a phone buzz," said Bartosik. "Actually, a little bit stronger."

"[My student and I] decided to focus on the things that I've been saying a lot in lessons.... We decided we would use the buzz to indicate that I wanted him to play quieter in certain sections."

The Tap-Tap device helps music teachers instruct blind and low-vision students through feel, rather than vision. Photo by Terence Ho.

As they got used to the device, they added more signals.

"Two buzzes might mean like get louder, you know, do a crescendo," she explained. "One long buzz would mean this, or one short buzz would mean that. We kind of expanded the vocabulary as we went along."

Chase Crispin, a blind musician and teacher in Lincoln, Nebraska, who consulted on the Tap-Tap project, said in a written statement from Carleton University, that "many people don't realize how much a musician is managing at once: posture, notes, rhythms, dynamics – the list goes on. For blind music learners, who memorize most of this, it adds even more layers."

Crispin said getting involved with the study was a way to "blend my own interest in technology with the needs I had as a blind musician."

Lu, who sings, plays guitar and is learning violin, said his passion for music and desire to be creative was part of the reason he took up this project.

He's surprised that a device similar to the Tap-Tap isn't already integrated into commercially-available devices, such as a smartwatch, and hopes that might be a possibility in the future.

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