



**Bookshare**

A BENETECH INITIATIVE

**FOUNDERS' DAY  
PRESENTATION**

**BLIND SA**

26 OCTOBER 2020

NTSHAVHENI NETSHITUNI

# BACKGROUND

74 years ago, on 26 October, a group of blind individuals met and formed the South African Blind Workers Organisation (SABWO).

The organisation was formed to self advocate for the employment of the blind in the mainstream sectors. More people became involved, and the concept grew.

In 1953 the wing of the production of braille in order to empower blind people through accessible reading material WAS ESTABLISHED.

Responsibilities for the organisation multiplied, now including education; employment; advocacy; braille; and youth which were brought in later in the years.

Blind SA now also provides orientation and mobility; skills development; and entrepreneurial skills to its members.

This is the work that started by only a handful, now extended to all, including those groups that did not fully enjoy some of the services prior 1992 due to segregative rules and practices.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is safe that I acknowledge the solid foundations laid by our fore-bearers.

We acknowledge the efforts put towards this sterling work, starting by Anthonie Swartz [1946-1948] (who founded the organisation together with Dr Cohen and Mr. J.C Harmse) to Cathy Donalson [2004-2020]. I must also take this opportunity to invite you to think with me about the passing of Ms Connie Auckamp, who was president between 1976 and 1984, and who later was Blind SA's life-long patron for many years.

Many committees under the leadership of these and other people came and passed, resolutions seeking to grow the organisation were passed. Some of these decisions were controversial and, to some, unwelcomed. The most notable was the decision to begin including other races, a decision which, I am told, broke others down in tears and others left the room. We are, at the end of it all, grateful that senses were deeply instilled in many, that they opted for the most appropriate decision to transform the organisation.

This bold step toward the right direction was not only appreciated by those who advocated for it, it was also necessitated by the realities on the ground. Blind people, because of the previous system, suffered a double tragedy if they were black, Indian or coloured, because they would be discriminated based on their race and on their blindness, hence we appreciate the transformative move.

I must also acknowledge all funders we have to date, including the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, who funded our braille services for many years even during the current trying times of COVID-19. This had made the lives of braille readers worthwhile, through sharing of relevant information, and I trust that even in the new life of the organisation, this relationship will grow. I need not forget St Dunstan who are funding the O&M project and the NSF who are funding skills development in respect of braille and entrepreneurial skills we started offering recently.

# REFLECTIONS

Many of us have had some kind of relationship with Blind SA, some, through the material we received in the format of magazines and textbooks which bore the name of

SABWO and its proofreaders and datatypists who worked with such dedication to produce braille for us. Some, like myself, had an opportunity to also work for this organisation. I started as a proofreader in 2004. In 2008, when I left for greener pastures, I was elevated to serve on the executive committee, as chair of advocacy committee. In 2012, I was elected vice president, after Bonita Jakavula (famously known as JB). It is this position which I still hold to date (at least until 31 October). Many blind people were empowered both as individuals or their groupings through the services of Blind SA. I am proud to say, the world is seeing your works. The vision encapsulated by Blind SA to serve the blind community is receiving recognition far and wide. Today, we are here witnessing the establishment of a partnership between Bookshare and Blind SA. This online library shall provide much needed free access to hundreds of thousands of reading materials to blind people. We further envision to strengthen our DAISY production so that those who prefer this format can equally enjoy reading.

What is apparent is that Blind SA had had a number of leaders whose vision hinged on empowering blind and partially sighted South Africans through reading. The establishment of a partnership with DSAC for the production of braille magazines; the recent setting up of a wing for the production of DAISY material and the partnership with Benetech to start an online library, all evince this point. Blind SA also prides itself for having partnered with the South African Braille Authority (SABA) in setting up the Braille Museum which will be named after Ms Josephine Wood. The Braille Museum shall serve as a braille reference facility for braille in south Africa. It is our belief that all these programmes, projects and partnerships will go a long way in the preservation of the legacy of these gallant leaders who came up with this enormous vision to streamline and professionalise the life of a blind person.

# CONCLUSION

In closing, I wish to extend my sincere thanks to everyone who injected their wisdom in the running and growth of Blind SA from its inception in 1946. We are grateful that you have entrusted us with the functioning and growth-oriented structures with such strong foundations. It is up to us to ensure proper care and dedication for the betterment of future generations. Staff of Blind SA must also be recognised, in that through their efforts, expertise and commitment, we have a shining organisation. Thanks to Benetech for affording Blind SA this opportunity to partner with them on the online library. As highlighted above, access to reading material is important to us, hence we are also still calling onto the government to accede to Marrakesh Treaty or urgently pass the Copyright Amendment Bill which gives more protection to reading material. Importantly, I believe Blind SA has created for itself a path which will take them far, beyond the heights that others think may be insurmountable.

***"The single biggest way to impact an organization is to focus on leadership development. There is almost no limit to the potential of an organization that recruits good people, raises them up as leaders and continually develops them."***

- John Maxwell

