

# Blind Citizens NewsAutumn 2021

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

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[Blind Citizens Australia Annual Report](https://www.bca.org.au/reports/)

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## Editor's Note

Blind Citizens Australia refers to our members as people who are blind or vision impaired. However, we respect the right of individual authors to use whatever language is most comfortable for them.

## Editorial

By Jonathan Craig

The issue you’re about to read covers the concerns of high school students, young people, and employees in a variety of settings. You’ll also read a touching tribute to June Ashmore, another of the advocates who helped shape our present, and whose influence we shouldn’t forget. I feel lucky constantly to be a part of a community spanning generations of inspirers and innovators, and unusually capable of telling our stories, to one another and to the wider world.

Much as I hate to make generalisations about any group of people, I think the number of us who make money out of writing in some form is statistically anomalous. This is partly for practical reasons. Much as we like to romanticise it, writing is a skill you can learn like any other, and many of us move, or are directed, toward it, because it presents few accessibility challenges compared to other careers.

But though I believe being good at writing mostly comes from writing a lot, I’d also say there are some life experiences that can give you an edge. One of the main ideas anyone with a disability has to grapple with is the constant reality of not quite experiencing life the way others do. Because, as my mother often told me, we live in a sighted world, empathy is a necessary skill for navigating everyday life.

We are constantly explaining ourselves, fine-tuning our scripts for interactions with strangers who’ve never met “one of us” before. When you ask for help in a shop, or visit a new Doctor, you have a very practical goal which you can only achieve collaboratively. If you can’t explain what you need and how the person in front of you can help, you may leave empty-handed. This skill is the information delivery aspect of writing.

We are also constantly explaining how we feel, trying to help people understand why, for example, posting undescribed photos on social media makes us feel excluded, without upsetting our friends. People born with impaired vision, from a young age, often choose to do extra work just to build friendships in the classroom and on the playground. In order to speed up the process, they’ll often learn a variety of approaches to making their peers feel more comfortable with their difference. That’s the second aspect or purpose of writing, persuasion, helping someone else walk in your shoes.

The thing about that cliché though is that if you want to walk together, while they’ve got your shoes, you’ll be wearing theirs. In order to get their message across, a writer must imagine a reader, and ask themselves questions like "what do they need and want to know", or "how can I show them how I feel"? You can have all the knowledge in the world on a given topic, and you can put that knowledge onto the page, but the key to being a great writer, in my view, is thinking about your audience. And I believe living with blindness and vision impairment gives us a competitive advantage.

This has been a long and hopefully interesting way to explain why you should write for Blind Citizens News. I'm not sorry. Writing can be a good gig, either as your main source of income or for some extra on the side. It's also easy to do remotely or from home. I’m not just talking about the traditional notion of writing, or the kind of journalism and personal essays we publish. I, for example, write policy documents for a living. There are a thousand ways to deploy good communication skills.

But only a few of the many people who claim to be writers can offer any proof. Publication in a venue like this, where there is plenty of competition, will draw more attention from time-poor editors, or even potential employers.

To be very clear, I’m describing the world as it is, not as I think it should be. I don’t believe we should be obliged to explain ourselves, to be teachable moments, to nurse people through the process of providing us with basic services, and even human rights. I don’t think we should have to constantly worry that people won’t understand us, won’t employ us, won’t want to hang out with us, if we don’t do a bit of extra work. That’s why I write, and why I took this role – to play a small part in making the world better.

But in the world we live in right now, many of us do choose, at least sometimes, to do that work, to answer the unwelcome questions from the stranger on the bus, to politely request small changes in behaviour that will make a big difference, for the hundredth or thousandth time. I’m not saying that’s the right way to go about things. I don’t think there is a right way. But to get through the day and/or sleep at night, many of us choose to become advocates for ourselves.

When you make that choice, there are benefits. One of those is an instinct for the kind of thought processes that are fundamental to good writing. Whether you’re trying to inform or persuade, you‘ve probably done it a lot more than you realise. Take those skills, and let them guide your words, and who knows where that instinct could lead you.

## Report on the National Policy Council

By Helen Freris

As we slide in to 2021, I thought it might be a good time to share news of what the National Policy Council of BCA has been up to, and what our plans are for the coming year.

Firstly, some thank yous, farewells and introductions… We have some changes to NPC membership since our AGM and Board meeting last year. After several years of service to the NPC, Fiona Woods’ term as Chair of the NPC has come to an end. Huge thanks are due to Fiona, whose insightful and wise leadership has resulted in some very effective policy development. We also sincerely thank and farewell David Morrell (Tasmania), Andrew Webster (ACT) and Joanne Chua (South Australia).

Joining us on the NPC in 2021 as the BCA board representatives are Lauren Henley and Prue Watt, and John Danesh Krishnan as our representative from Tasmania.

So the members of the NPC for 2021 are:

* Helen Freris – NPC Chair
* Lauren Henley – Deputy Chair
* Prue Watt – Board Rep
* ACT – Vacant
* NSW – Lynne Davis
* Queensland – Paul Price
* South Australia – David Squirrell
* Tasmania – John Danesh Krishnan
* Victoria – Sean Tyrell
* Western Australia – Sean McLaughlin

You may recall that last year, the NPC launched BCA’s health policy statement at BCA Connect. The policy is on BCA’s website, and we hope members will find it useful when accessing health services. This year, we plan to produce a checklist for accessing GP services, based on the policy. This will assist us when advocating for ourselves to receive the most accessible support when we visit a GP. Public health screening services are also on our radar, and we are researching different accessibility provisions for screening services internationally, with a view to informing BCA’s advocacy to make these services more user friendly to us as people who are blind or vision impaired.

If you have any thoughts or experiences regarding access to screening services you would like to share, we would love to hear about them.

Last year the NPC commenced a large piece of work to redevelop a policy statement on education. A lot has changed since BCA’s current policy on education was prepared in 2009. Since then, online education has grown in popularity, delivered by both public and private providers; and there is the topical issue of access to education in a pandemic. The NPC will be redeveloping BCA’s policy statement on education, and we will be seeking your views and input, so please give this area some thought.

Have you had to scan a QR code recently, perhaps at a restaurant or other public venue? QR codes aren’t always easy for us to scan, but are likely to be here to stay as we adapt to COVID normal. Therefore, the NPC will develop a position statement on QR code accessibility, to assist BCA members and staff to advocate for the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired in this area.

Much more is planned by the NPC in 2021, and I look forward to sharing our work with you in Blind Citizens News and other BCA publications and media. You can also contact me or the NPC through the BCA office. The NPC is always keen to hear from members about areas where you think policy or position statements from BCA would be helpful, or your experiences using our existing policy statements.

## Answering Your Questions About Independent Assessments

By Jonathan Craig

If you’ve been involved in the BCA or general disability communities in the last few months, you’ll probably have heard about independent assessments. We believe it’s important to understand them, as despite significant objections from the disability sector, it looks like everyone who currently uses or wants to access the NDIS will have to undergo an independent assessment.

BCA has been in conversation with the NDIA about independent assessments, through regular meetings, and through a forum held on the 17th of March, where NDIA CEO Martin Hoffman answered questions from CEOS in the sector.

At a BCA Inform event last November, we also gave you the opportunity to ask questions directly of Dr Sam Bennett, General Manager of the NDIA’s Policy, Advice and Research Division. With more than 50 BCA members in attendance, this was clearly a hot topic. You can listen to a recording of the forum, or read a summary of the event, [on our website.](https://www.bca.org.au/bca-inform/ndia-independent-assessments/)

Because this is a significant change which will likely have a big impact on people who are blind or vision impaired, we’re working hard to provide you with new information as it arrives, and we’ll continue to take every opportunity to raise the concerns of our community with the agency.

But we also realise that it’s extremely hard to keep up with, or even understand developments relating to the NDIS. If you’re confused about independent assessments, that’s ok. That’s what we’re here for. In this article, we’ll try to answer some of the biggest questions that have been raised with us so far, so hopefully you’ll leave with a better understanding of what’s changing and how it might affect you.

Importantly though, this information reflects the NDIA’s current thinking. They have engaged in a second pilot of independent assessments, as well as an extensive consultation process, to ask us how we can make this system work well. It’s highly likely that independent assessments will be implemented, but feedback from participants in the pilot and sector advocacy may well change the way they work by the time they roll out. Nonetheless we believe that as part of our commitment to empowering you, it’s valuable for you to be informed about what may happen. Having the information available to you will help you make up your own mind about independent assessments.

### What are independent assessments anyway?

Independent assessments are a new process which all NDIS participants and applicants will need to take part in in the future. The NDIS Act 2013 talks about “functional capacity” in relation to people with disabilities. Our NDIS plans are meant to build our capacity.

That’s why it’s called an insurance scheme - it’s designed to invest in people earlier in order to save the government money later on.

But in order to know whether the scheme is working properly, the NDIA has to measure our functional capacity. This is what an independent assessment is designed to do. Essentially, independent assessments are a new process the NDIA is introducing to help work out what your functional capacity is.

### Why is the NDIA introducing them?

According to the agency, independent assessments are being introduced to:

* Take away the financial, time and energy burdens of gathering evidence about disability by creating a process they fund and perform themselves
* Ensure that people with similar needs receive similar levels of funding.

### Will I have to have an independent assessment?

From mid-2021, all people applying to the NDIS will need to take an independent assessment to access the scheme. From late this year you will also need to take an independent assessment as part of a plan review process.

### What will an independent assessment decide?

The measurement of functional capacity which results from your independent assessment will establish two things:

1. Whether you are eligible for the NDIS. This is alongside the requirement for medical evidence of disability which remains in place.
2. The funds in your plan, apart from some extra items which you can ask for in your planning meeting.

What this would mean is that the planning meeting would no longer be the place where many of the decisions about your funds are made. You would receive a “draft plan” before your meeting, which would contain your budget. The NDIA imagines that the planning meeting, in future, would mostly be about helping you work out how to spend your funds to meet your goals. In this meeting you could also have specific supports added to your plan that weren’t covered in the independent assessment. Examples for our cohort might include dog guides, braille displays or electronic magnifiers.

### Who will be my independent assessor?

The NDIS has established a panel of organisations who will be delivering independent assessments. The eight organisations on the panel [were announced](https://www.ndis.gov.au/news/6118-independent-assessment-panel-announced) in late February. These are mostly allied health organisations, employing workers including social workers, occupational and physiotherapists and psychologists. The intention is that most people will be able to choose between multiple organisations who could do their assessment if they prefer the approach of one over another.

### What does an independent assessment involve?

You and your assessor will work through a series of assessment tools, which the NDIA believes will be able to collectively measure a person’s capacity regardless of their disability. This will mainly involve you answering questions. Some require comments, some ask you to answer yes or no, and some ask you to answer on a scale (e.g. no difficulty to extreme difficulty).

This will take quite a long time because of the number of questions you will need to answer. The NDIS says it could take between 3.5 and 4 hours. One of the assessment tools is intended to be taken by someone you know, be that a family member, friend, or support worker. This tool asks them questions about what level of difficulty you have with various tasks.

People taking part in the second pilot have been asked to take part in a performance component, also known as the “participant interaction” section of the assessment. In this part of the assessment participants are asked to perform a task in front of the assessor. A fact sheet provided to pilot participants by Healthstrong, one of the organisations on the panel of assessors, gave examples like “making a cup of tea or a snack” or “scrapbooking”.

### Can someone attend my assessment with me?

Yes. The NDIA has confirmed that you will be allowed to have someone come with you to your assessment. You will also be able to choose where you have your assessment (e.g. at home, work or elsewhere).

You’ll be able to take breaks if you need to, or even have your assessment over multiple sessions.

### If assessors are paid by the NDIA, how are they independent?

The assessors are independent of the NDIA, in that they work for other organisations to provide information to the agency. They are also independent from participants and applicants, because the intention is that your assessor won’t know you personally, so they won’t be biased in any way.

### Why are people worried about independent assessments?

BCA has advocated for a number of NDIS participants and applicants who haven’t received the supports they need. When this happens, it can often be because NDIS planners don’t know much about people who are blind or vision impaired, and struggle to understand what they need. BCA has worked with the NDIA to create videos and fact sheets which could help planners develop supports for us. But the NDIA is planning to hire a workforce of independent assessors who have little knowledge about how our disability impacts on our lives.

The assessment tools which the NDIA plans to use haven’t been well-tested with people who are blind or vision impaired. There is concern that within the context of generic, standardised assessments, it will be hard to explain the impact of blindness or vision impairment, and how supports could help address those impacts.

In short, there are concerns that these assessments won’t be able to measure our functional capacity as well as they can for others, and that as a result, we will struggle to get the supports we need.

We would echo most of the disability sector in saying that the participant interaction section could feel demeaning. But we’d also say that it’s particularly complicated for people who are blind or vision impaired. You might be able to make a cup of tea easily at home, but you may not be able to safely travel in the community at all. So how do you choose a task that reflects your real capacity? And will an assessor understand the context in which you’re performing a task?

We would also like to see more information about what you can do if you’re dissatisfied with an independent assessment or its results, since independent assessments and assessors won’t be accountable to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal in the way that planners and other decision makers are.

### What are you doing to address these problems?

In our conversations with the NDIA, we have clearly outlined our concerns. We have built a good relationship with the agency over time, so we feel they are receptive to the points we’re making. We have also worked with them to bring about improvements to the scheme in the past, like making sure people who are blind or vision impaired can access materials in their preferred formats.

We are eager to see results from the second pilot of independent assessments, and get a better idea from them about how well the assessors and assessment tools will work for us. The NDIA has said it wants to create a “better and fairer” scheme, and we’re hoping to work closely with them to make sure it’s better and fairer for people who are blind or vision impaired, whatever that requires.

You can read recent submissions BCA has made to the Department of Social Services on independent assessments which is available on our website.

### What should I do?

If you’ve read this far, you’ve already done a lot. Hopefully, you now feel more informed about what independent assessments are and why they’re inspiring so much conversation. Again, we’d remind you that the NDIA is giving us opportunities to tell them what we think of these plans and how to improve them. And that’s exactly what we’re doing.

We are also working to identify new opportunities for you to talk directly with the NDIA. Keep reading our member updates to learn about these as they arise. And if you took part in the second pilot of independent assessments, it would be really helpful if you could call our office, or email us, to tell us about your experience, good or bad.

## A Case for Braille

By Ella Edwards

### Editor’s Note

Ella won one of two fine works prizes in the youth category of the 2020 Onkyo braille contest Asia Pacific region. She is 17 years old. Ella was responding to the prompt “if Braille is still significant in the blind community today, what should be done to promote its use”?

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Braille is the printing system used by blind people to read and write. Since its invention by Louis Braille in 1824, it has played a significant role in the lives of blind individuals. Braille has a role in education, orientation and mobility, communication and identification. In the age of computerised technology, the question has been asked if braille still plays such a significant role in the lives of blind people, as it did 196 years ago, and if so, what should be done to promote its use?

The facts are simple. Print will always have a significant role in the lives of sighted people, and it will be relied upon forever. Braille is no different. In order to live an independent and fulfilling life, and to continue to learn, we must first have those elementary skills of reading and writing. In order for blind people to have those skills, braille is essential. Therefore, it's crucial that we introduce blind people to braille as soon as it's humanly and logically possible.

Though most of the blind population are adults, there are still many blind children, who require braille as a crucial part of their education. From birth, a sighted child's world is filled with words that a blind child doesn't have. Those words are in countless places that the sighted population takes for granted. The blind child doesn't have that added benefit of seeing print wherever they go, they must actively look for braille, which isn't always there.

For this reason, it's important that blind children be introduced to braille as early as possible. It should be placed around the home, used to label and identify objects, and made a part of life. With the resources we have now, braille books are accessible to blind children either from a library that offers braille, or by sending books from home to a braille transcriber, thus ensuring the concept of reading can be taught as it is to sighted children. Though blind people can now access information through screen readers, nothing can replace braille under the fingertips, just as nothing can replace print. Therefore, professionals helping children and their parents in those early years, need to know at least the basics of braille, and make sure their clients are in contact with organisations that can provide braille resources.

82% of the blind population lose their sight at age fifty or older. This can take away their confidence in their ability to live independently. Apart from sight itself, reading is probably one of the most devastating things to lose, as it impacts almost all the aspects of everyday life. In order to travel, we must be able to read signs, street names and maps.

In order to manage household appliances such as the stove and washing machine, we must be able to read labels on the buttons. In order to identify clothing sizes and food items, we must also be able to read their labels. Therefore, if we cannot read, we cannot manage most of our everyday life tasks. Hence braille still plays a significant role in the lives of blind people. However, many older people lose confidence in their abilities as they age, meaning that they don't feel confident or competent to learn braille.

For this reason, it's vital that healthcare workers dealing with blindness are able to refer their clients on to experienced braille teachers as soon as possible. In this way, the client can begin to get their life back on track far more quickly and effectively than if they were unable to read or write for the rest of their lives. But it is vital that those same professionals who make that referral, also provide resources to assist in the learning of braille. Otherwise, the client may not follow through and learn braille.

In an increasingly online world, and with screen readers for reading, writing and some identification, an increasing number of blind children are no longer learning or using braille. They rely solely on voice technology for reading and writing purposes. However, just as print is a necessity in places such as public toilets, braille is the equivalent for blind people, and cannot be provided through screen readers.

No matter what screen readers we use and what capabilities they have, there is nothing to replace physically reading. That's why there are now braille note takers and braille displays that can connect to electronic devices using screen readers.

For schoolteachers, integration aides, and visiting teachers, it's critical to incorporate use of this technology into all aspects of the education system.

It's vital for blind children to use hard copy braille and the Perkins Brailler for things such as mathematics and languages. This is because screen readers and refreshable braille displays on braille computer technology, don't display math symbols and lines of working correctly, either in braille or in print on a screen. It's also necessary to be able to use braille in hard copy for things like tests, as often a computer is not allowed for the reading aspect, particularly for reading comprehension tests. So teachers and others involved in blind children's education, need to be informed about braille and the ways in which it can be used, and ensure its inclusion in the individual's learning.

It's evident that braille is still impacting blind people as much now as it was at the time of its invention. It helps in their everyday life, because it's essential to be able to read and write, in order to live life to the fullest. Every person has the right to learn to read and write, regardless of whether they have sight. Today, there are many resources to obtain braille. So as long as people are aware that there is help available, braille can continue to play a significant role in the lives of blind people. However, this can only happen if organisations that provide and teach braille, continue to educate the wider community and encourage its use.

## An Eye to the Future of Employment Project Review

By Naomi Barber

In late 2019, BCA started work on the Eye to the Future of Employment project. Funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency’s Information Linkages and Capacity Building grant, the project aimed to change how employers perceive people who are blind or vision impaired.

This project was planned to have 4 major areas.

* The development of a series of short videos to showcase the success of people who are blind or vision impaired in different areas of employment.
* The creation of a website to support people who are seeking employment or navigating a career change and those looking to hire people who are blind or vision impaired. The site includes accessible features and blindness specific resources to assist in career planning, developing a resume, preparing for an interview, understanding workplace culture and much more. It also has a section dedicated to employers and recruiters to assist in making both recruitment and workplaces accessible.
* The establishment of Internships with partner organisations to challenge the perceptions of hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired and support people into different roles and businesses.
* A symposium where employers, recruiters and HR professionals could discuss the accessibility of recruitment and hiring people who are blind or vision impaired.

To support the project we also created a Facebook group that facilitates discussion around employment and shares relevant information.

After creating the videos, developing the website, and establishing relationships and agreements with partner organisations, our plans were disrupted by COVID-19. As a result, we needed to pause the internship and symposium components of the project. After consultation with our funding body, we were provided a project extension and were able to revisit the internships.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t possible to gather people in one location for a symposium. Although we had a venue and the content prepared, the social and physical restrictions in the states proposed were not lifted to allow us to move forward with the event. So again we consulted our funding body and were able to pivot our focus to work on delivering online events. We hired our own intern to work with the project team and set to work on finding a way to engage with employers and allowing them to ask questions and seek practical solutions to accessibility in employment.

As a result we held 2 online workshops that hosted 55 people from the employment, recruitment and HR sectors.

We hosted a panel discussion that involved people who are blind or vision impaired and their employers responding to questions and providing insights into accessible recruitment, reasonable adjustment and workplace modifications. The employers shared some amazing tips and highlighted that accessibility in the workplace supports all employees, how an open dialogue is key to ensuring all staff are supported at work and that employers are able to discuss needs and how those needs change over time.

Some of the key insights from the workshops were captured in these panellist quotes:

“Good design is accessible design.” - Jonathan Craig

“One of the best things organisations can do to help make change is affirmative action. In the short run it’s challenging – but in the long run it gets results.” – Matt O’Kane

“Larger organisations such as Universities, corporations and non-profits should use their purchasing power to encourage software companies to make their products accessible. Prior to a purchase they should find out how accessible the product is. If it’s not accessible – then ask why not. The power of their purchasing power makes a difference.” – Jaci Armstrong

The project overall aimed to address the underemployment of people who are blind or vision impaired and provide practical ways for employers to engage in accessible recruitment and employment.

At the start of the project we asked BCA members to share with us their experiences both positive and negative throughout their working lives or careers.

Some of the comments we received included:

“I have been totally blind and a white cane user since the early 1980s before which I was legally blind. I was mainly unemployed until the advent of screen reader technology and won my first full-time job when 38 years old.” – Michael

“I want to show that blind or vision impaired people can aspire to a range of roles and demonstrate to employers the types of careers blind and vision impaired people can have.” – Dr Theresa Smith-Ruig, Senior lecturer at UNE Business School

“I’m proud of my achievements. I remember being out of work as a young man, applying for any and every job that came up. I did things that weren’t long term or in my areas of interest. I kept going and now I have a job I absolutely love. It challenges me, it forces me to travel to Melbourne and puts me out of my comfort zone but I’m completely supported by my team, my manager and the wider business.” - Mitch

“ At 52 years old, I think the work I am doing is unique for blind/low vision people. Given the right employers it could be something others could do.” - Adam, working at a Pizzeria

“I work in hotel cleaning but also do volunteer work and provide support work at day programs.” - Stacee

What we want to showcase is that people are at different stages of life, career, vision loss, interests and expertise. There is a place in employment for everyone, whether they are starting out, finishing their higher or tertiary education, career established or looking at self-employment. There are so many varied skills and interests that bring so much life experience to a workplace.

Our members have spoken of their positive outcomes in employment, and we have heard from their employers that inclusive workplaces are great for all employees, not just those who are blind or vision impaired. By developing our website tools for employers, hearing from employers at our online workshops, and showcasing some of the success stories in our videos, we have encouraged employers to reimagine their approach to recruitment and employment.

Does an employee really need a driver’s licence for that role? Can a person use public transport or ride share services for the position? Would that even be a cost saving to the business? Do you really need to advertise a role in a PDF document that is likely to be inaccessible? By using a PDF format job description you may be limiting your reach to suitable candidates. We have shared resources that talk to document accessibility for employers. We’ve also suggested that if you just asked people how they would like to receive information and any access requirements they may have upfront, you may receive some great information from an applicant.

### What Now?

We are still in the throes of a global pandemic, which shook this project into very different ways of existing. But we look at how technology has supported business to maintain function throughout this time. We have seen organisations shift their workforce capabilities and move rapidly to develop processes to work remotely, use new software, test technology and challenge the status quo of working 9-5 from an office space.

Now more than ever we have the opportunity to capitalise on workforce flexibility, the introduction of new technology and the ability of employers to shape their employee experiences. BCA is working on the next application for funding to further An Eye to the Future of Employment. We hope to be able to leverage the work undertaken in this project to gain further momentum with employers and continue our work levelling the playing field in recruitment and employment for people who are blind or vision impaired.

BCA thanks everyone who expressed interest in being part of this project, supported the events, hosted an Intern, shared their experiences and provided feedback. We look forward to further work in the employment space in the future.

## Vale June Ashmore

By Vicki Scheeren and Robert Altamore

June Ashmore, a powerhouse to the blindness and disabled communities, passed away on 21st October 2020 at the age of 85. We say Goodbye to a wonderful friend, mentor and advocate.

June has left behind her wonderful husband and companion, David, their 4 children and their grandchildren. David accompanied June on her travels nationally and internationally. He also assisted at many of the meetings and functions. Thankyou David, we share your loss.

June was raised in Queanbeyan, qualified as a physiotherapist, and then married her soldier husband David, who was subject to the Army’s usual demands to travel wherever needed, including overseas.

June practiced paediatric physiotherapy until her field of vision became so restricted that she could no longer see a whole child. Her deteriorating eyesight was caused by Retinitis Pigmentosa, a hereditary disorder.

June worked as a Policy Officer at the Australian Council for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled where she absorbed useful information about the politics of disability and writing successful proposals for government grants.

In close contact with the Society in the early 1980s June was asked to help start a Friday group for children who were blind and to assist with collating a Sensory Awareness Kit for Special Education Pre-School Teachers.Undaunted by her own loss of vision, but with increasing awareness of the problems and feelings involved, she started a support group for people with Retinitis Pigmentosa, which became an incorporated association Retina Australia ACT in 1992. This association became a member of Retina Australia in 1993 and June was elected National Secretary. She subsequently represented Australia at the Retina International World Congress in Switzerland in 1996 and at the Congress in Washington DC in 2000.

At the same time June was elected Vice President of BCA. As part of that role, she represented Australia at meetings of the World Blind Union in Fiji, Canada and South Korea. She also spent some time in Vietnam in association with a BCA program to train women who were blind to learn braille, to experience and master daily living skills related to becoming independent in their own homes and to contemplate the possibility of earning a living.

June made numerous contributions to the advocacy work and social activity of the BCA ACT Branch. We particularly recall her contribution to a joint NSW ACT Working Group which developed a comprehensive directory of service for people who are blind or vision impaired in NSW and the ACT.

When June consented to take on the role of President of the Canberra Blind Society (CBS) in 1997, she brought new ideals and ideas to the way Canberra’s blind population was served. Her Presidency brought the CBS increased ACT Government recognition and funding and enhanced community recognition for its activities. Following a successful 10 years at the helm of CBS, June retired only to return as a Board member. One of her continuing passions after retiring from the CBS Board was to complete an official history of CBS. This she achieved on CBS’s 60th anniversary in 2018.

June’s three dog guides gave her independence and comfort over thirty years and frequently opened the door to new friendships. In fact, friendships were a speciality of June due to her warm and caring concern and fantastic memory for the vast network of her contacts. Always a volunteer, she was constantly available to give support to friends and members.

June’s achievements were many and they made an enormous difference in the lives of many Blind & Vision Impaired people in the ACT, Nationally and Internationally. Just a few of her many contributions are listed above.
In 2003 June was awarded a Medal in the Order of Australia (AM) at the Australia Day Honours for service to Blind and Vision Impaired people, As an Executive member of a range of Blindness and Vision Impaired Organisations, providing advocacy and support to many.

BCA ACT members sadly miss our friend June. We join with members of our National organisation to acknowledge her wonderful contribution to bettering the lives of Blind and Vision Impaired people of Canberra, Australia and the World.

## I Don’t Need Them to See Through You

By Jessica Knight

### Editor’s Note

This piece is excerpted from Growing Up Disabled in Australia, a fantastic anthology about the experiences of people with disabilities. It’s published by Black Inc. and is available as an eBook and audiobook, narrated by editor and disability activist Carly Findlay. This is only one of the pieces included relating to people who are blind or vision impaired. I chose to publish it here because it offers, in a light-hearted way, extraordinary insight into the unique challenges of living with vision impairment, and how a few small moments can profoundly shape the way we see ourselves.

This piece contains themes which may not be suitable for all readers. Parental guidance is recommended. It also contains what I believe may be the first swear word in the history of Blind Citizens News.

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“Hey. How blind are you really?”

“I once ate potpourri from a bowl in a cafe because I thought it was mixed nuts.”

This amuses the young man I am talking to at 2am. He has taken me home and I am trying to explain how bad my eyes are. It is my ‘wearing contacts’ phase. I am my own example of a post-glasses makeover.

I am attempting to figure out (for the hundredth time) how to take the contact lenses out of my eyes before getting busy with this person, who has a pet rat in a cage in his bedroom.

This person is cute, and I think it’s quite sweet he has a pet rat. It’s so difficult to remove the contacts and it causes my drunken self so much stress that I start to cry a bit at the futility of love and human connection. This lubes up my eyes so that one of the contacts finally pops out and into my hand. It works with the other one as well. Success! I put them away and turn to the young man sitting on the edge of his unmade bed. He is smiling at me. I wipe my tear-stained eyes, smudging my eyeliner. I smile back and pull my t-shirt up and off over my head.

This is being twenty-five.

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Back to the here and now. I have sat on my glasses and now they are bent quite badly. Placing them on my nose, I find the hinges have angled the eyepieces and the lenses so that they are facing my nose instead of being in front of my eyes, their vital position in the humble mission of making me slightly less vision-impaired.

There have been numerous close calls over the years, where I have been about to sit on them but realised seconds before placing all my weight on top of the unsuspecting object. This particular pair of glasses is important to me. I feel good wearing them. They make me feel intelligent and capable and a little bit sexy.

Then why were they left on the couch for the thirty thousand and fifth time, you may ask. If you could see me right now, you would see me shrug.

It was not always like this. I have a long history of hating my glasses. They were not always considered a cool accessory, worn by intellectual posers or used as a form of fashion. Please do not wear glasses unless you need them. Pretending to be blind or visually challenged is actually really uncool. So is trying on my glasses as though it’s fun to have warped vision. Your face is usually bigger than mine and you wreck the fit. This happened all through school and university. My crush in second-year uni once wore my glasses while pouring a drink of juice. They missed the glass, made a mess and left me to clean it up.

Now that I live in Melbourne and have many writer and creative friends, I am surrounded by people who need and wear glasses. It is a magical and wonderful world.

I take my mangled glasses back to the place where I got them. They fix them but say that the damage has been done to their overall sturdiness and future longevity. The end is nigh.

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My first pair of glasses was placed on my nose when I was four. They had thin metal frames and curved over each of my ears so they didn’t fall off easily.

“Coke bottle glasses!” my father exclaimed. He was not wrong.

He made it clear that they were adorable. Though he and my mother referred to me as their little owl, I grew up loathing those glasses. One day I put them somewhere so safe that I forgot where they were, and for two weeks I had to go to school with nothing but my natural amount of vision. Then one morning, as I was about to go to school with my backpack on my tiny back, I looked into my mother’s concerned face as she asked me one more time if I could remember this special place where I had hidden my glasses. I ran into my bedroom and opened my underwear drawer. They were there, pushed to the bottom and back of the drawer.

“Where are your glasses?” was a question I heard a lot while doing completely normal things like watching television or reading a book. It was so annoying. I should have been able to hold books as close as I wanted without judgement. My mother would sing-song ‘Vanity, thy name is vanity’ for the trillionth time as I resentfully placed my glasses on my nose and sat a bit further away from the television. It was easy for them to say it was silly and vain – they didn’t wear glasses. All four of my siblings have excellent vision. My parents did not need glasses until they were in their fifties.

The bifocal years didn’t help my resentment. When I was thirteen, an ophthalmologist suggested that I wear bifocals for my two-tone vision needs, so that I could read books with one part of the lens and do everything else with the other part. Old people wore bifocals. My grandparents and other uncool people wore bifocals. The word sounded crusty and decrepit to my young mind. I didn’t just have Coke bottle bottom lenses to contend with anymore.

When I brought the glasses home, I stood alone in the bathroom with the door closed. I looked at myself in the smudged mirror while wearing my new bifocals. My reflection was not smiling.

Because I only had a few precious moments before being found by a younger sibling, I had a quick but intense self-hating cry and went back out to continue being a big sister. A big sister who did not wear her ugly glasses.

It was at this time that I very nearly picked up a giant brown spider from the living room floor. It was hiding under a stray sock. The carpet in the room was faded floral, and while I was cleaning things up I mistook the unsuspecting spider for an abandoned toy. The worst part was that after I squealed it scuttled away under the couch, evading capture and relocation outside. Did I take this as a sign to wear my glasses more often? No.

When I did start wearing my glasses out and about, it amazed me how many dudes felt the need to come up and tell me that I would be more attractive without them. This unprompted, freely given advice enraged me every single time. These young men thought they were giving me a much-needed tip so that I might be deemed worthy of being sexed up by them. It happened a lot while I was working as a cleaner of hotels on Hamilton Island. I took the advice of these beach-bodied douchebags with a sprinkle of sea water. No, that’s not true. I felt ugly and sad.

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Now I do wear my glasses everywhere, but my eyesight is still not great. Glasses cannot fix a total lack of peripheral vision or inoperable cataracts. I wear my glasses everywhere now because five years ago I managed to get a pair that I love. Until then I had only ever got them from the Medicare range of free frames. You had the option of about three or four different frames that ranged from super-awful to meh-not-great-but-they-will-do.

This time was different. This time I was getting my frames and lenses from a hipster eye place that served me tea and had antique-looking rugs on the floor. They even had an optometrist there who I could see for an eye test. When I got tested the optometrist sat down in her chair and gazed at me in wonder.

“How did you get here?” she asked.

I stared at her in confusion. None of my past eye doctors had asked me such philosophical questions. She must mean literally, I finally concluded.

“By tram,” I said.

“Your eyes are extremely bad. You should consider applying for a disability plan.”

This was news to me, and life-changing news at that. Perhaps my eyes were the reason I was bad at so many jobs even though I tried so hard. I did not follow her advice until three years later. It took me that long to wrestle with my ingrained ableism.

This is how I found my first true love: after seeing the kind optometrist I browsed the amazing array of glasses, the likes and variety of which I had never seen before. The chosen pair were plain black and made me look like Zooey Deschanel in New Girl (ha ha, okay, ‘feel like’) and every asshat beat-poet wannabe.

When I found out how expensive they were, it was all over and the dream was dead – until a payment plan was arranged. They were expensive not just because of the frames but because my prescription was so high and unique. Thanks to my pathological desire to be special, this both pleased me and ruined me financially. The new glasses even came in a bright red case. No boring glasses house for these babies. They have got me through so much over the last five years.

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How bad are your eyes?

Bad. Real bad. I once mistook a stranger’s two-year-old child for a small adorable dog.

I go back to the same place to look at new glasses and get my eyes tested. I am nervous. What if my already legally blind eyes have got worse? What if they are going to deteriorate at the same rate as the eyes of people who get glasses in middle age? If my eyes are this bad already, surely it is just a matter of time until my eyesight goes completely? Of course I could live a happy life more blind than I am currently. I just don’t really want to.

I am already the kind of blind that angers cyclists as they dodge me and my lack of peripheral vision. Sunlight hurts my eyes and it takes me a little while to adjust to sudden changes in light.

On arrival I am approached by my fave assistant. She wears amazing bright-coloured glasses that match her pastel purple skirt and pastel blue blouse with white collar and bow. She makes me a cup of peppermint tea and gives me a biscuit. It is so much nicer than all those poky old windowless examination rooms of my youth in regional Victoria. Also, thanks to being an adult and having a bit of foresight, I am getting ready to replace my beloved black-framed glasses before they break completely. There is a crack forming, so I’m preparing myself. This way I can have time to pay for my new pair and not be in a blind bind, like when my last pair broke. Who can afford new and awesome glasses whenever they want without having to live off mee goreng and toast? Without getting evicted because they have spent their rent money? Not this hard-of-seeing, all-extreme-emotion-feeling babe.

Do I dare go for tortoiseshell frames? I ask myself as I am shown a multitude of this kind. There are more than thirty different types.

The decision is made for me by the cost difference between getting the same frames again and my favourite pair of tortoiseshell frames. That difference is three hundred dollars. In two months I will be wearing dark-blue tortoiseshell frames.

The optometrist who greets me as I sip my tea is not the woman I remember, and my reaction proves that I’m more of a feminist now, because instead of noticing his handsomeness straight away I simply feel deflated that it’s not the woman from before. It would have been nice to tell her that I finally took her advice.

Eye tests don’t take so long when your eyesight only allows you to identify the large, single letter at the top of the pyramid of letters that get smaller and smaller. After the optometrist shines a weird light into each of my eyeballs, he tells me my eyes have not got any worse. I confess my fear: if my eyes are this bad now, how will they be when I’m fifty? He explains that when someone who has had perfect vision gets glasses, their eyesight has gone from 99 per cent perfect to 95 per cent. The difference is not that much but enough to need glasses. Since my eyes are barely 50 per cent working, they won’t actually decline like someone with 20/20 vision will experience decline. I nod.

“So you’re saying my eyes are already fucked, so I can relax and not worry.” I smile. “Thank you for clearing that up. It was stressing me out.”

I put my glasses back on and look at him. Oh, my goodness, he is handsome, I think, as I scoop up my tote from the floor and walk out.

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Jessica Knight is a Melbourne-based writer and performer, and a conflicted heathen. Jessica wrote and performed Mormon Girl at the 2019 Melbourne Fringe Festival. Her writing has been published in Meanjin, SCUM Mag and Archer.

## Feedback for BCA

Do you have any compliments, suggestions or concerns you wanted to let BCA know about? You can do this anonymously by going to our website [www.bca.org.au/feedback](http://www.bca.org.au/feedback) and completing a feedback form or you can call the BCA Office toll free on 1800 033 660. Your feedback will be used to improve our services to better meet the needs of our membership.

## How to Make a Complaint About BCA

Any member, client, volunteer, or their advocate, can lodge a complaint about the services provided by BCA. Complaints can be made in the following ways:

Phone: 1800 033 660
Email: bca@bca.org.au
Website: www.bca.org.au/feedback

Post: Blind Citizens Australia, Level 3, Ross House
247 – 251 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, Vic 3000

If there are complaints of a serious nature, the Chief Executive Officer will ask that the complaint be put in writing.

Complaints will be recorded in accordance with the requirements for complaints management outlined by The Office of Disability Services Commissioner. Member and client privacy will be respected and protected in relation to the recording, management and resolution of the complaint. For a full copy of BCA's complaints policy, please go to our website [www.bca.org.au/feedback](http://www.bca.org.au/feedback) or call the office.

## Funding and Donations for BCA

BCA would like to acknowledge the generous work of the Jeffrey Blyth Foundation. The Foundation was formed in 1995 with BCA being the primary beneficiary.

We would also like to acknowledge our funding partners: the Department of Communities and Justice NSW, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Victoria, the Department of Social Services, Vision Australia, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, Guide Dogs Victoria, Guide Dogs Queensland, Guide Dogs NSW, VisAbility Inc and our generous members.

If you would like to make a donation to Blind Citizens Australia, you can call 1800 033 660, and use your credit card. You can also donate online using the “Donate Tab” on the BCA Website. All donations over $2 are tax deductible.

## Submit Your Writing to Blind Citizens News

The Editor welcomes your submissions for Blind Citizens News. Submissions for the next edition close on Friday 28th May 2021. Contributions can be submitted in Braille, print, audio CD or electronic format (in Word in Arial 16-point font).

Send emails to bca@bca.org.au and write “Blind Citizens News Submission” in the subject line. For all other format contributions, please send the document to the BCA Office.

Submissions should be between 500 and 1200 words in length. Submissions cannot be made anonymously, and the Editor must be made aware of any conflict of interest which may be relevant to the author's work.

## Directory of Contact Details

* Links from the Independent Assessment article;

To read or listen to a summary from the BCA Inform event on this subject visit <https://www.bca.org.au/bca-inform/ndia-independent-assessments/>

Listing of the Independent Assessment Panel <https://www.ndis.gov.au/news/6118-independent-assessment-panel-announced>

* Further information on the Eye to the Future of Employment Project Contact: Naomi Barber, email: naomi.barber@bca.org.au. Eye to the Future website: [www.eyetothefuture.com.au](http://www.eyetothefuture.com.au)
* Growing Up Disabled in Australia is available in audio book from: [www.wavesound.com.au](http://www.wavesound.com.au), [www.audible.com.au](http://www.audible.com.au) and more.
* To find out more about BCA’s next steps with Audio Description, visit <http://www.bca.org.au/adontv/>. Recorded information regarding scheduled programs containing AD are available via BCA's telephone system which can be accessed by calling us on 1800 033 660.
* National Women's Branch (including Womentalks)
Contact: Janene Sadhu
Email: nwb@bca.org.au
* National Women’s Branch (Aspirations Magazine)
Contact: Carmel Jolley
Email: carmeljolley@bigpond.com
* National Policy Council
Contact: Helen Freris
Email: npc@bca.org.au
* NSW/ACT State Division
Contact: Graeme Innes
Email: graeme@graemeinnes.com
* NDIS / NDIA

Phone: 1800 800 110

* My Aged Care Contact Centre
Phone: 1800 200 422
* Information about co-payments for Home Care Packages
To find out how much you might be required to contribute, contact the Department of Fees and Charges within the Department of Human Services (Centrelink) on 1800 227 475.

## New Horizons Radio Broadcast Schedule

### South Australia

Adelaide, 5RPH 1197AM and on RPH Adelaide digital

Times: 9.15pm Wednesday; Repeated 6.00pm Friday

### Queensland

Brisbane, Reading Radio 1296AM

(can also be heard on DAB Radio and IHeartradio app)

Times: 2.00pm Fridays

### NSW and ACT

Sydney, 2RPH 1224AM, Sydney East 100.5FM, Newcastle/Lower Hunter 100.5FM

Times: 3.00pm Thursday; Repeated Saturday 2.00pm; no Saturday repeat for Newcastle/Lower Hunter

Canberra, 1RPH 1125AM Times: Tuesday 9.15am: Repeated 8.00pm.

Junee 99.5FM Times: This is a relay of 1RPH

### Tasmania

Hobart Print Radio Tasmania 864AM, Launceston 106.9FM, Devonport 96.1FM

Week 1 Times: 5.15pm Wednesday, repeated 5.15pm Friday

Week 2 Times: 5.15pm Wednesday, repeated 5.15pm Friday

### Victoria

Melbourne, 3RPH 1179AM and Vision Australia Radio regional stations; RPH Albury 101.7FM, RPH Bendigo 88.7FM, RPH Geelong 99.5FM, RPH Mildura 107.5FM, RPH Shepparton 100.1FM, RPH Warragul 93.5FM, RPH Warrnambool 882AM

Times: 4.30pm Wednesday; Repeated 6.30pm Sunday

### Western Australia

Perth, 6RPH 990AM

Times: 4.30pm Wednesday: Repeated 6.30pm Sundays