



# The Johannesburg School for Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children Trust (Beka)

Newsletter No.1 2009



## Celebrating 200 years of Braille

Throughout 2009, there will be worldwide celebrations in honour of Louis Braille's 200th birthday. Celebrations in South Africa will include launching the country's first Afrikaans recipe book in Braille and in large print for people with low vision who cannot read Braille. Celebrations kicked off on the 4th of January with 100 guests at an event in Centurion paying tribute to Louis Braille.

Working with Blind SA, Beka hosted a Braille exhibition on the 5th of January, the first day of the school term. Media that covered the event included SABC Television, the *Star*, the *Citizen*, the

*Sowetan* and Channel Africa (radio). They interviewed Cathy Donaldson, President of Blind SA and recently appointed trustee of Beka. They learned that Blind SA is the only organisation in South Africa that prints Braille in all 11 official languages. One of Blind SA's main objectives is ensuring that children taught in Braille receive quality education, as standards have dropped since Cathy Donaldson was at school. Interviews also included Mortain Dube, Beka's Principal and blind pupils Nhlanhla Mpsi age eight and Obvious Ncube age five.

Blind SA also hosted a gala dinner at Emperor's Palace

on January 30. For more information on events around Louis Braille celebrations, please visit Blind SA's website:

[www.blindsa.org.za](http://www.blindsa.org.za)



Cathy Donaldson with Beka pupils and Principal Mortain Dube at the Louis Braille Expo

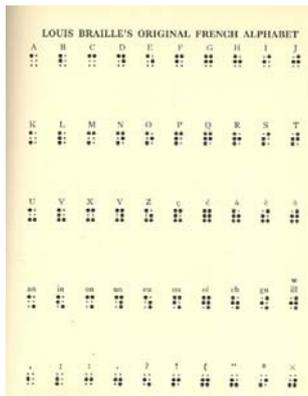
## Louis Braille: Patron of the blind



Louis Braille was born on January 4, 1809 in the east of Paris. When he was three, playing in his father's workshop, he took a saddler's knife that slipped and plunged into his eye. The injury and infection of both eyes blinded him.

Right: Louis Braille's original French alphabet

At age 10, Louis enrolled at the Royal Institution for Blind Youth, where he showed his brilliance in all academic subjects. A child prodigy, at age 15 Louis invented an alphabetic system which could also be used for mathematical symbols and musical notation, with the right size for a blind person's fingertip.



Composed of 64 symbols, the Braille alphabet was born officially when its 1st edition was published in 1829. A second improved version appeared in 1837. In 1839, Louis provided the foundations of the contracted Braille.

To communicate with sighted people, Louis creates the Décapoint - raised script still used worldwide to this day. In 1841, with his friend Pierre Foucault, he builds the Raphigraphe (needle writer), a machine for writing letters using his Décapoint system: the ancestor of our typewriter.

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## Condolences...

to the family and friends of Helen Suzman, who sadly passed away on 1 January 2009. Ms. Suzman visited Beka in 2005, to the delight of the staff and children. Ms Suzman was an activist for the marginalised and so deeply empathised with the struggle of the disabled to receive quality education. She will be missed.

## Little known fact:

Charles Barbier de la Serre, Captain of the French Army, was interested in the problems of "the fast and secret" writing. In 1821, he introduced to the Royal Institution for Blind Youth his writing process composed of 12 raised dots, to translate words into sounds. Louis Braille later transformed la Serre's raised script into the writing system used today, Braille

## Sparkling New Kitchen...three years later

Three years, a crooked builder and thousands of rands later, the school kitchen has finally been beautifully renovated. Ever since Beka started, there have been plans to refurbish the kitchen to make it more suitable to the needs of the children. Initially in 2005, staff at Barclays Bank fundraised to sponsor the renovations, so we found a builder through a well respected architect. Unfortunately, the builder ran off with a deposit of R29000, leaving the kitchen with unusable surfaces and uneven, poorly done tiling. The stove had also been moved out of the kitchen into one of the classrooms. At the time, the school was under immense pressure as a public event, the annual Chocolate Fest would be hosted on site. After unsuccessfully trying to contact the builder, we were forced to ask Edward's Homecare to replace the floor tiles at a cost of R4000. The last we heard the builder was in Port Elizabeth. We were unable to move forward with pressing charges during this time as the school and its partner charity, Children of Fire had just been defamed

on ETV. Dealing with the fallout of the programme took precedence.

In 2007 the United Nations Women's Guild contributed to the kitchen fund, both enabling us to make up for the money stolen as well as proceed with the renovations. After an extensive search, we settled with SDM Kitchens who endured our interrogation patiently aware of our previous experience. Before the new kitchen unit could be installed, the gas stove had to be moved to the centre with the gas meter going outside. Whitelaw Gas & Plumbing kindly agreed to reduce the cost of their work. They also made a mesh cage around the gas meter to keep the children from fiddling with it.

The school is now proud to have a modern kitchen with a double stainless steel sink, a larger fridge, granite tops and plenty of storage room – keeping potentially dangerous crockery and cleaning liquids away from the curious and adventurous fingers of visually impaired children. The additional cupboard space is also used for storing

paints and other art class materials. The new surfaces will withstand the rough treatment by the often carefree children and volunteers and are much easier to keep clean, especially after lively cookery classes. Additionally, part of the granite counter protrudes so that a wheelchair can tuck under it.

The extended granite tops also serve beautifully as sufficient work surface for all the children to be able to participate in the cookery lessons. As we have children with different levels of disability, cookery is a valuable lesson for all children regardless of disability – it is a sensory experience including taste, smell, texture and even sound of ingredients. The lessons also help in building confidence as the children feel a great sense of achievement after learning how to make something on their own.

Thanks to our long term supporter Hirsch's Home Stores who replaced the gas stove when it gave problems.

### Before



### After



## Introducing... the Next Generation Perkins Braille

When it was first introduced in 1951, the Perkins Braille transformed Braille literacy by making it much easier for people to write Braille. It is widely acknowledged that Braille users are much more likely to be employed and are therefore more independent than those who do not use Braille. The original Braille, created by David Abraham at Perkins School for the Blind in the United States (US), took more than 10 years of development. It has become the most commonly used Braille in the world.

Now, more than half a century later, Perkins Products and Product Development Technologies (PDT) have worked closely together to improve the original Braille. After extensive international research on the different limitations and problems experienced, they came up with the 'Next Generation Perkins Braille'. The Next Generation is easier to operate as less force is required to punch the keys, there

is an easy erase button and a paper tray. It is quieter, smaller, about 25 percent lighter than the original Perkins Braille and has a handle, making it portable even for children. Additionally it has a durable polycarbonate casing to endure rough treatment (it is unchanged inside). Truly a 21st century upgrade, it is also environmentally friendly as less oil and manufactured materials were used in its production.

The Next Generation was launched in October 2008 in the US and is currently available to order for \$650 - for more information visit Perkins School for the Blind's website: [www.perkins.org](http://www.perkins.org).

Next Generation will be launched internationally in early 2009. For more information on its international launch, contact South African National Council for the Blind: 011 836 2499

Pictures © [www.dexigner.com](http://www.dexigner.com)



*The Next Generation Braille: lighter, smaller, faster, quieter and greener (environmentally friendly)*



## Beka: a resource for parents and teachers training

While Beka supports government's policy of integrating disabled children into mainstream schools, there is still a lack of manpower and skills to support this philosophy. Parents know the frustration of finding mainstream schools that will accept their disabled children. Even once accepted, it is an uphill battle trying to get these schools and the Department of Education to meet physical and learning challenges faced by children with disabilities. Just one of these challenges is a desperate need for qualified classroom assistants to supplement the teachers' work and ensure the involved participation of disabled children. Too many disabled children either never attend school or end up dropping out, while some fortunate ones go to the few and expensive special schools.

From its inception, Beka started running short courses for classroom assistants working with disabled children. This came from the need to help Beka's founding pupil, Dorah Mokoena, to learn and the inability of mainstream schools to assist her. The courses focused on the practical aspects of making and adapting normal teaching curricula and equipment to suit the needs of the disabled pupil.

They also tried to get the assistant to put themselves into the pupil's shoes and to find ways of explaining concepts regardless of the pupil's type of disability. The courses emphasised the importance of working with parents in their disabled child's education, as family support and understanding is vital in their development.

Beka remains a source of advice for parents and fellow teachers on practical ways of making inclusion a reality. Beka is also open to sharing knowledge and skills with neighbouring schools and teacher training institutions. In 2007, following a request from Wits University's College of Education, Beka gave a blind teacher in training, Bheki Dlamini, practical experience for two weeks. In 2008, Beka again allowed final year students from the same institution on site to observe and discuss methods of teaching blind children Mathematics concepts.

Beka is committed to being part of the solution for ensuring access to quality education for disabled children so please feel free to contact us for advice or if you would like us to assist with practical teacher training. The school is open to

running a course for Gauteng teachers if desired. For detailed information on the classroom assistant courses visit [www.firechildren.org](http://www.firechildren.org).



*Put yourself in their shoes: teachers should understand the fears and needs of their blind pupils*



*Beka's teacher, Mai-Claude Tem discusses maths concepts for blind children with teachers in training.*

## Austrian teacher at Beka for a year



Qualified special needs teacher, Barbara Lechner volunteering at Beka for a year

27 year old Barbara Lechner from Vienna, Austria started working with blind and low vision children in 2003 at the Institute for the Blind in Vienna. Eager to travel and apply her skills elsewhere, Barbara chose to come to South Africa. Initially, she was not able to find a suitable teaching post at a special needs school in South Africa so she decided to further her studies in Kwa-Zulu Natal while working on community projects in Klaarwater in 2008. Towards the end of the year, she learned about Beka on the internet and pursued a teaching post as her heart was still set on working with children with special needs. After spending the festive season in Austria,

she returned in time for the beginning of the school year and will be sharing her skills and knowledge at Beka for the rest of 2009.

In her short time at Beka, she has had to adjust to the different teaching style. "I love that the school is small so I am able to interact with every child". For the first term, she is focusing on teaching life skills and speech therapy to founding pupil, Dorah Mokoena and burn survivors Tapera Jani (3), Thapelo Phore (2), Seiso Ratswana (4) as well as some new very challenging low vision pupils, Tshephisang Kobeli (6) and Phindile Buthelezi (10).

## Exciting new additions to the school's board of trustees

Beka is lucky to have two new trustees, with much knowledge and experience with the visually impaired: Marietjie Richter, former Head of Optometry at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) was the first to accept Beka's invitation. Soon thereafter, Cathy Donaldson, President of Blind SA accepted as she is a passionate advocate for the education of blind children. They were officially voted in at a trustee's meeting on the 10th of November 2008.

Since the school started, Beka's pupils

have benefited from the expertise of the Optometry Department at UJ. Marietjie Richter in particular has always shown kindness and interest in Beka and its pupils, so she was keen when we invited her to be a trustee. Though qualified as an Optometrist, Marietjie has also had several years experience as a lecturer and her articles published in various medical journals.

Cathy Donaldson has been a member of Blind SA for more than 40 years. Over this time, she has been involved in its

marketing, administration and financial management. Cathy is also the current President of the National Association for Blind Bowlers and has participated in several international bowling events including the International Paralympics World Bowls Championships in 2004 and the World Disability Bowls Championships in 2007. Cathy has committed her life helping the visually impaired to have access to affordable Braille materials, employment and educational opportunities.

## Beka's wishlist

- The Next Generation Perkins Braille - currently only available from the United States but it will be launched internationally later this year.
- Low vision pupils resources e.g. large print books, flash cards and visual aids such as magnifiers
- A new set of text books for each subject from Grade R to 7.
- Software for blind children, e.g. *Jaws* and *Magic* from Sensory Solutions SA
- Computers, Braille paper, a Braille keyboard and Braille watches
- Someone to sponsor building renovations to improve the library with a window and ceiling.
- Weekly gardener and plants that are green all year long
- Reliable maintenance man as needed
- Piano lessons for budding pianist, Katrinky Khanye, age 14 and Sizwe Hlophe, age 8.
- Cookery teacher to come weekly
- Volunteers to cook supper for the kids
- Electrician willing to work pro bono or at discounted rate
- Funding the building of a palisade fence around the driveway and rebuilding the wall around sandpit
- Atlases and maps in Braille
- Cards and board games in Braille to provide boarders with hours of fun over the weekend



Beka hopes for Braille maps and atlases  
Picture © South African National Council for the Blind

## Exploring the Cradle of Humankind



*Beka pupils with their guides in front of Maropeng Educational Centre*

Rumbi Gumede is blind and on permanent oxygen supply while Dorah Mokoena is blind with no hands. This did not stop them from exploring the fascinating Cradle of Humankind's Maropeng Educational Centre.

Together with their classmates and teachers, they set off early on the 12th of November 2008 to discover the origins of mankind. The Centre assisted Beka's staff and pupils with free entry as well as providing two guides. Dean Rees and friends met transport and other costs.

Touring the Centre is a sensory experience that is educational, stimulating and suitable for the enjoyment of visually impaired pupils, as visitors are encouraged to interact with most of the exhibits. Designed with the theme of 'discovery', the entrance at the beginning of the tour looks like an enormous burial ground while the exit at the end of the tour is an ultramodern silver, grey and glass building. The plan is to trace the development of the Universe, Earth and

humanity from its origins and evolution right through to its possible future.

As they entered the building, the children were amazed to learn that the Universe is about 14 billion years old and the Earth was formed about 4.6 billion years ago. The children's favourite part of the exhibition was the underground boat ride. The boat ride was designed in such a way that at certain points one can reach out to feel the icy walls and the snow recreating the Ice Age. Or hear the roar of volcanic eruptions and feel the heat emanating



*From what looks like a burial ground at the entrance...*



*...to the futuristic design at the exit.*



*Discovering the history of the universe, earth and humanity*

from the models revealing what it must have been like when a meteor hit the earth 65 million years ago, wiping out dinosaurs and forever changing earth's climate.

The biggest lesson we wanted the children to take from the experience is a recurring theme throughout the Centre: We have more similarities than differences, "All of humanity shares an African heritage. We are one, diverse species across the globe, with our roots in Africa."

(pictures and quote from the Centre's website: [www.maropeng.co.za](http://www.maropeng.co.za))

*"Stunning - will have this put on our website. Many thanks for what you do for the children".*

*- Gail Johnson, Founding Director of Nkosi's Haven, where 11 year old Rumbi Gumede stays.*

## National Children's Day Celebration 2008

Beka is proud to have had three of its fulltime pupils and two part-timers represent Gauteng in the 2008 National Children's Day Celebration. The Department of Education only invited 25 children from the entire Province to attend the celebrations in Kimberley from 6 - 7 November. Beka pupils that took part were Boipelo Motheogane (low vision, age 15), Philisiwe Ngidi (low vision, age 16) and Doreen Msimanga (veld fire survivor, age 11). The criteria for selection of pupils included:

- ◆ refugee children
- ◆ the majority had to be from poor communities
- ◆ children with disabilities

Children from across the country had discussions around the theme, "Business unusual: All hands on deck—support municipalities in the advancement of child protection and development."

Each province was given a topic. Gauteng's representatives discussed the

achievements and challenges of safety in schools and communities. They highlighted that all children should be able to learn in a safe, nurturing environment but the high rate of violence and aggressive behaviour in Gauteng's schools is a serious obstacle. It was agreed that in order for this to be achieved there needed to be more cooperation and communication between government, teachers and parents.

## Beka assists burn survivor with low vision

Londeka Ngidi, age 16 from Pietermaritzburg, accidentally tipped hot water over herself as a toddler. She damaged an arm, lost much of her scalp and has scars on her face. From 2003-2005, Children of Fire organised for her to spend several weeks at a time in Joburg receiving medical treatment. While in Joburg, Beka was in contact with her school in Pietermaritzburg to ensure that she did not fall behind.

Half way through 2008, Londeka's mother called asking if Londeka could come to Joburg. She wanted a second opinion regarding blurred vision, soreness and itching Londeka was experiencing in her right eye. She had already taken Londeka to an Optometrist who said she was showing signs of Keratoconus.

Normally the cornea has a smooth curved shape but with Keratoconus, the cornea is cone shaped and has an uneven surface. Symptoms include sensitivity to light, blurred vision and

itchiness. It is a degenerative disorder, usually starting at puberty and progressing until late thirties, after which it slows down and often stops.

Soon after arriving in Joburg in December 2008, she was taken to see Ophthalmologists at Garden City Clinic and Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital. They confirmed Keratoconus and she was booked for the fitting of hard contact lenses at Baragwanath on the 7th of January 2009.

Spectacles and soft contact lenses can correct vision problems in the early stages of Keratoconus. However, as the disorder advances, most patients are then surgically fitted with hard contact lenses to improve vision. This does not stop the progression of Keratoconus so some patients may require corneal transplants at a later stage. If a patient is resistant to contact lens there is a way of flattening a cornea that is too steep and making it more tolerant of contact lenses.

Londeka was discharged the same day and the doctor said that it could take up to six months for vision to be improved. She will be returning to Joburg for a check up in March.



*Londeka Ngidi, recently underwent an operation correcting visual impairment resulting from Keratoconus*

## Eleven thousand bread clips for Art

Beka often hosts other local primary schools visiting our school as a part of their community project or doing arts and crafts with their pupils. Most of our children are extroverted and enjoy meeting new people. Pupils from visiting schools find spending time with special needs children an educational and eye-opening experience. They especially enjoy coming up with creative ways of producing sensory artwork to ensure full participation and enjoyment from children with a range of disabilities.

One of Beka's best visits to date, was several hours spent with pupils from Christ Church Preparatory School. They had contacted Beka after reading that we sometimes use recycled material for arts and crafts. Later in the year, they let us know that they had collected 11000 bread clips for Beka! Initially they had only planned to drop off the bread clips and spend a little time at the school. However, they immediately warmed to the children and spent more time playing games and enthusiastically putting some of the bread clips they had collected to good use in artwork they created together with Beka's pupils.

Leanne Johnson, the teacher who organised the project wrote: "I want to thank you for the opportunity that we had to go and visit your children this morning. I brought four of my grade 6 girls and it was an incredibly special visit.

I left there feeling humbled and blessed by the enthusiasm, charm and delight of your children! I don't think I have ever been part of something as significant as meeting the children this morning. The experience was so special that I cannot eloquently convey it to others. It was lovely to meet Kezia and teacher Mai Claude and the other ladies who teach and work there. They were so friendly and welcoming. We were entertained on the piano by Katrina and Sizwe and Katrina read to us in Braille and showed us how to use the Braille machine. On leaving, Sizwe rushed out to pick a flower for one of my grade 6 girls! The little ones not only crept onto my lap, but into my heart.

I know that my grade 6 girls were impacted in a truly positive way by their visit this morning, and who knows how that will play out in their lives as they grow older. Once again, thank you."



*Beka and Christ Church Prep School pupils spent the day doing tactile art*



The Johannesburg School for Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children Trust (Beka)

Phone: 011 726 6529  
 Fax: 011 482 4258  
 E-mail: firechildren@icon.co.za

We see your child's potential.



**Donations can be made to:**  
**JHB School Blind, Low Vision**  
**First National Bank, Melville**  
**Branch code: 25 65 05**  
**Acc.-no.: 620 502 081 59**



Since mid-2007, Beka has been seeking advice from the Fire Safety Department regarding Beka's two exits in case of an emergency. One option to provide easier access was to change the locks on our glass door and security gate. After talking to various locksmiths, this seemed too complicated and expensive. We had always planned on making another exit, leading directly to the playground. So we moved ahead with installing a third door with a push bar which provides easy access for children with disabilities.

**In the media:**

**Katrinky Khanye** age 14, blind from glaucoma, was interviewed by SABC Kid News in December 2008.

**Yo-TV** had daily coverage of Beka and its sister charity, Children of Fire from 1-4 December 2008

**Bongani Madlala**, low vision, age 15 was in the Sandton Chronicle

**Famous quote:**

*"We the blind are as indebted to Louis Braille as mankind is to Gutenberg, (inventor of the printing press). Without a dot system what a chaotic, inadequate affair our education would be!"*  
 — Helen Keller, activist for the deaf and blind

**Holiday Activity Week:**  
 30 March-3 April 2009

**Chocolate Fest:**  
 1 August 2009

For more information:  
 Project Manager, Rosie Chirongoma at 072 276 7323.

# Pearls and Pimples

<p><b>Pearls to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Dean Rees and other investors for keeping the school afloat</li> <li>◆ SDM Kitchens for almost completing kitchen renovations</li> <li>◆ Helpful officials at the fire safety and environmental health departments</li> <li>◆ Yotv for positive four day coverage on the school and its sister charity, Children of Fire</li> <li>◆ Our trustees for their support</li> <li>◆ Jakki Bates, Melissa Banks and friends for wonderful suppers on Wednesdays and Sundays</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pimples to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Consol for not consistently picking up glass, leaving the glass bin overflowing and then never paying anything for the glass</li> <li>◆ People who dump their rubbish into the glass bin</li> <li>◆ Volunteers who fail to clean up after themselves and the children despite repeated requests to leave the school as they found it</li> <li>◆ After laboriously crushing 37kgs of cans, we found out that we were only owed R17 from Collect-A-Can</li> </ul>
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