

BRAM—"We won't be stopped"

by Martin Dalley

In June of last year former students of the Halifax School for the Blind set up the Blind Rights Action Movement known as BRAM. Its main objective is to see that blind people get their rights just like other people.

With regard to BRAM's objective, President Edward Russell said, "we have a start, and we have been recognized. We have credibility as a worthwhile cause to people who count."

BRAM is now conducting legal research into legislation concerning blind, "particularly where

legislation discriminates against the blind in areas of education and employment and related areas," said Russell.

The Blind Rights Action Movement is also involved in a project to create jobs for blind people during the summer.

Much more Public Relations is to be launched to make BRAM and their purposes more widely known, and to involve more people in their cause.

BRAM will also receive the services of two CYC workers for one year. They will put BRAM in better touch with the community.

"All of these projects and research are being done in view of protecting and gaining for blind people real Canadian citizenship which they presently do not enjoy," Russell said.

AT THE SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

The administration and staff at the school still wish to discuss the problems and methods put forth by BRAM in their brief which was submitted to both factions in November of last year.

Staff members were in rough agreement with the overall objections presented by BRAM, but disagreed in tactics.

The brief dealt with the problem of limited facilities which exist to the extent that the school has had to turn away some eligible students. Lack of financial support and the lack of research into vocational fields for which the blind can be trained, were also stated as major problems in the brief.

The brief also stated that students are housed in dreary, depressing dormitories with from six to ten beds in each room. Neither residence—male or female—is equipped with adequate fire escapes. Classroom space is inadequate to the point that sometimes more than 15 mentally handicapped children must be supervised in a small and cramped room.

Another problem at the school is the lack of a social worker, a medical doctor and a psychiatrist. These types of services are essential to the understanding and treatment of the blind students and especially the emotionally disturbed children, pointed out BRAM in their brief.



Short-run recommendations

The following recommendations are not listed in order of importance. They merely represent a summary of measures that BRAM feels should be taken in the short-run to alleviate "some" of the existing problems at and created by the School for the Blind.

1) Additional staff should be hired to transcribe textbooks from print to braille. Presently the school cannot keep up with the demand in this area, which adds unnecessary stress to the problems of teaching the blind.

2) Immediate integration of students into the public school system (academic, commercial, and vocational) should take place in cases where this program is feasible. Such an integration program should take place by September, 1971, and should include, at least, the top three grades at the school. This program, of course, should be accompanied by a proper evaluation scheme to determine suitable placement, vocational or academic.

3) The benefits of implementing recommendation #2 could be richly expanded, and somewhat enforced if students attending outside schools could be locally housed in private homes, BRAM highly recommends this proposal; the results would be very rewarding, and the cost definitely no higher than the present cost of housing the students at the school.

4) The hiring of a greatly needed professional staff should take place at once; guidance Counselor, psychologist, sociologist, Dietician, etc. As well, all existing staff members should be evaluated by a committee of experts, with a view to determining

their qualifications and attitudes.

These staff members termed unsuitable by the committee of experts should be replaced, or required to take courses which would properly qualify them for whatever position they may presently hold. A list of such courses can be acquired from the U.S. Dept. of Education, Health, and Welfare. There is also the possibility of this special education program being financed under program 3 of the Canada Assistance Plan.

5) All possible fire hazards that do not involve huge capital outlays should be remedied at once.

6) The present travel training program should be put into the hands of experts; unqualified volunteers cannot provide an adequate service in this area. If this program were handled the way it should, then, blind children would be permitted to travel alone, instead of with guides. The present policy at the school is not to allow blind people out alone.

7) School staff should make full use of available social and medical facilities. This would probably require the hiring of a full time doctor, as well as other professional people referred to above.

8) Steps should be taken to set up a home economics course, involving the hiring of a full time domestic science teacher.

9) A committee should be set up to see that the above recommendations be implemented and evaluated. This committee could somehow insure that these suggestions be carried out effectively. BRAM would be pleased to be represented on such a committee.

"In the recent past, we have not been working with members of the school (faculty and administration) because we felt they were not taking us seriously, and under such conditions, would have impaired our effort," Russell said.

Meetings between members of BRAM and the government have been planned in the near future to discuss these recommendations. The president of the Blind Rights Action Movement is convinced that the movement is morally right in its endeavors and intends to pursue them to their conclusion.

"We will not be stopped. We feel morally obligated to see that justice is done," Russell said.

Long-run recommendations

1) The governments of the four Atlantic provinces should assume full financial and administrative control and responsibility for the Halifax School for the Blind before the commencement of the 1971-72 school year.

This would mean the abolition of the private corporation presently administering the school. We would hope that the new body responsible for the management of the school would include authorities in the fields of eye-care, child psychology, and the education and care of the handicapped, and perhaps most important of all, some successful blind people from the community at large.

2) The pre-school program should be expanded and improved. Facilities for the pre-school blind children should be established in major towns throughout the provinces, so that these children would receive expert training and guidance even before they reach school age to offset such natural tendencies as over-protection by their parents.

Such a program worked out and conducted in cooperation with the children's parents would enable the blind child to better develop and also help the parent participate more fully in the upbringing of their children.

3) The School for the Blind should be integrated as extensively as possible into the public school system. Sub-culture which now exists at the school must be illuminated; therefore, it would be necessary to create an environment which would bring the blind child and the "normal" citizens of our country in contact with each other in the normal course of their daily activities. It is impossible to artificially encourage this type of relationship.

4) A vocational program which would meet the needs of a blind person attempting to learn a trade which would enable him to survive in the modern work-a-day world must be established.

5) Some type of program which should be developed locally, would train House-Parents and teachers in the care and education of handicapped children. We feel such a program would benefit not only the School for the Blind but also similar institutions in the region.

It seems to us that the Teacher Training program should be diversified to enable prospective teachers to major in specific types of teaching, i.e., the blind, the deaf, etc., along the lines presently used in universities where all persons taking an under-graduate course, in such faculties as Arts or Commerce, have to major in a specific area of concentration.

6) An Advisory body, independent of those managing the school, should be established to periodically examine the operation of the school and report to and advise the government on possible courses of action.