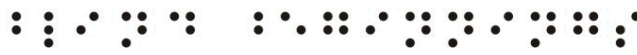


Spring 2010

Blind Beginnings



Helping blind
and visually
impaired youth
reach their full
potential.

Shawn Marsolais: The Driving Force Behind *Blind Beginnings*

If it weren't for Shawn Marsolais, our manager of programs and services, there would be no *Blind Beginnings*...

Born with retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a genetic degenerative eye condition, Shawn's condition went undiagnosed until the age of five. It is likely Shawn was born with low vision, but there were no clear indicators for her parents that anything was amiss. "A public health nurse noticed Shawn had a lazy eye and suggested we follow up with it. We did, but I wasn't too concerned because my siblings and I also show signs of having a lazy eye when we get tired." said Shawn's mother Mary-Paule. "As part of the treatment, Shawn was fitted with glasses at 14 months. Doctors assured me the lazy eye issue would correct itself before Shawn started kindergarten."

Shawn's parents continued



to have her vision checked on a regular basis, but at the age of five, a doctor filling in while her regular doctor was on holidays took one look at her eyes and immediately diagnosed her with RP. That diagnosis came out of nowhere for her parents. "We were devastated. One moment we had a daughter with nothing more serious than a lazy eye and the next minute, she had a disease that would eventually leave her completely blind."

recalled Mary-Paule. "It was very scary for me because I knew absolutely nothing about blindness. We didn't know anyone who was visually impaired or blind, let alone another parent raising a child who had low vision. I was invited by CNIB to attend a meeting to talk about blindness, but everything was for adults dealing with vision loss and not parents or children. If I had had the chance to see other blind children getting around safely or doing what other sighted kids did, I would have relaxed a bit, but I never had that opportunity. I never imagined that Shawn could go on to accomplish all of the great things that she has. I was convinced if she knew she was going blind, she would give up on all her dreams and I didn't want that. I wanted her to keep chasing her dreams, no matter what." Mary-Paule now realizes that the only one putting limitations on Shawn were

Name Our
Newsletter
CONTEST!

We are excited to be launching a newsletter for *Blind Beginnings* so everyone can stay up-to-date on our activities and events, but we need a name for it. Got any bright ideas? If your idea is chosen, you'll win a *Blind Beginnings* t-shirt! Contest ends June 15th so start brainstorming! Send your submission to shawn@blindbeginnings.ca

other people, not Shawn herself. "I constantly worried about Shawn and what might happen to her so I was overprotective."

"Looking back," reflected Mary-Paule, "that wasn't the best thing for us to have done, but we didn't know any other blind children and their parents

"When being blind doesn't make you different, it stops being the thing people see first."

Shawn Marsolais

to learn from so I didn't know what she was capable of. If something like *Blind Beginnings* had existed for us where I could have seen other blind children doing things I thought Shawn couldn't do, I know I would have been able to relax a bit. But Shawn has always been a determined person - whatever she sets her mind to, she makes happen, even when we tried to slow her down! She has accomplished more than I ever imagined she could and I am incredibly proud of her. She's my hero."

Because her parents struggled with finding the support they needed, they also struggled with how to balance Shawn's unique needs of having low vision with those of her sighted younger sister Jen.

"To their credit, my parents always gave my sister and I the same opportunities," recalled Shawn, "but before I knew that I was legally blind, I often felt uncoordinated and clumsy compared to Jen because I never seemed to be able to do

things as well as she could. When we rode our bikes, I constantly would put my feet on the ground so I wouldn't get going too fast, but Jen never did. I couldn't figure out how she could be so fearless. And when the two of us would play catch with my dad. I would see the baseball leave his hand, but then I'd lose sight of it and wouldn't know where it went until it hit me on the head whereas Jen seemed to have no trouble catching the ball. Even the simplest things like running through a sprinkler in the summer made me feel clumsy because every kid seemed to know when to move so they would get sprayed but I never did. I just thought I was inept and clumsy."

Her parents continued to struggle with how to empower Shawn despite her continuing loss of vision and didn't actually tell her she was legally blind until she was 12 years old. "One night at dinner, my parents told me that I had an eye disease that would continue to get worse. It was a huge shock. I felt like I was broken, like something was wrong with me."

Being embarrassed about vision loss, Shawn worked hard to fit in. "I was the only blind student in my school for most of high school so I downplayed how much I really couldn't see. I refused to use a lot of accommodations in front of my classmates. Using them might have made my life easier, but would have clearly identified me as being visually impaired and I didn't want that."

After high school, she enrolled at Douglas College and did a university transfer

Summer Camps: You Gotta Be Here!

For those looking for a summer getaway, you've got lots of options! All of the camps listed here are funded by CNIB, but coordinated by *Blind Beginnings*. We know you'll have a blast! Held on Bowen Island at Bowen Lodge By The Sea, campers can take part in activities including swimming, kayaking, showdown, music and talent night. The camp fee of \$210 includes all camp activities, transportation and meals. For more information, contact Shawn.

CNIB Braille Literacy Camp July 4 - 10, 2010

Designed for youth aged 8 to 12 who are already or will be using Braille, campers will practice and enhance their Braille literacy skills through a variety of fun activities.

CNIB Teen Camp July 13 - 19, 2010

Teens aged 13 to 19 will enjoy some fun in the sun while getting a look at using technology to their advantage, especially for older teens who are preparing for life after high school.

NEW - CNIB Creative and Performing Arts Camp July 28 - August 3, 2010

Youth aged 8 to 14 looking to improve their skills in drama, music, creative writing, poetry and more will love this new camp! All levels are welcome!



Other Summer Camps....

Here are some other summer camps you might want to check out...

Camp Hornby July 22 - 26, 2010

Held on beautiful Hornby Island at the Tribune Bay Outdoor Education Centre, this camp is exclusively for blind and visually impaired or deaf/blind youth. Family members are also welcome to attend the camp. Campers will have lots of things to challenge themselves with, including kayaking, swimming, rock wall climbing and the camp's very own "Leap of Faith!" If you want a more low-key holiday, you'll enjoy going for boat rides, hikes and singing. Cost is just \$55 per person, or three or more family members for \$150. Registration is now open so visit their website today! www.camphornby.org

CNIB Family Camp August 12 -15, 2010

This is your chance for the whole family to go to camp! Enjoy all the fun of camp while meeting other families with children who are blind or visually impaired. Cost is \$400 per family and, like the CNIB youth camps, meals, accommodations, transportation and all camp activities are included. For more details, contact Mary Kay Kennedy at marykay.kennedy@cnib.ca or 250-519-1102.



program to UBC in psychology. But during her first year at Douglas, Shawn's vision had deteriorated to the point that it was unreliable. "Some days I could read if the print was enlarged and other days I couldn't because things were too blurry. I started using text-to-speech on my computer and audiobooks more and more because my vision was getting too unpredictable to rely on. Plus, it was getting too confusing for people like my instructors to understand how one day I could read my large print exam and the next day not. I quit wearing my glasses and just gave up trying to see and started to rely more on my other senses. Besides, I always thought I looked better without glasses!" Shawn mused.

Though Shawn had made the conscious decision to start using more "blind-friendly" ways of doing things, she was uncomfortable about actually telling people she was legally blind. "I thought that if blindness was something that had been kept a secret from me, it must something I should be embarrassed about so I worked very hard at hiding it."

After graduating from UBC in 1999, Shawn worked at a youth centre on Vancouver Island, but in 2000, she applied for an internship program offered through CNIB and the federal government. "The program was for unemployed or underemployed Canadians and all I knew when I applied was that if accepted, I would be working abroad for 6 months in a position that suited my skills." What she got was a position as a learning support assistant at the Dorton House School for the Blind in Kent, England. "I was excited about the job," said Shawn. "But I was also nervous because I didn't know what to expect. I had never been to a blind school before."

The experience turned out to be life-changing for Shawn. "When you are the only person who is visually impaired or blind in a group of sighted people, you feel you need to make up for it because being blind or visually impaired sets you apart from everyone else. But at the blind school, everyone had some level of vision loss so how much you could or couldn't see didn't matter. When being blind doesn't make you different, it stops being the thing people see first. I fell in love with the students I worked with not because of their level of vision, but because of how funny and smart and talented they

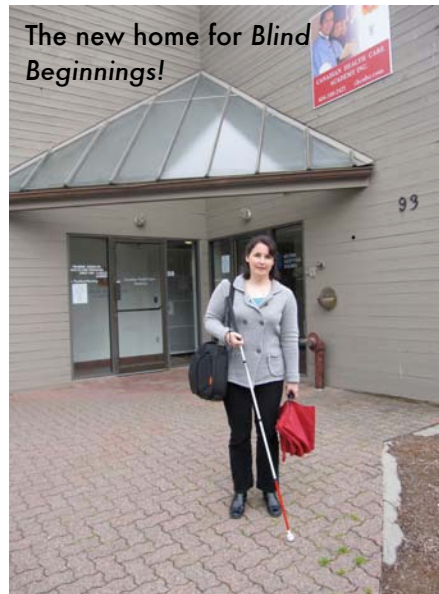
were. At the same time, I realized that I couldn't look at myself as being broken if I could love and admire these young people so much. They helped me accept my vision loss and I wanted to bring that sense of community to blind and visually impaired children and youth back home. I recognized how important it is to bring kids together where the fact that they are blind or visually impaired is irrelevant so they too can start to see their own talents."

From that experience, Shawn came back to Canada wanting to work with children and youth who were blind and visually impaired, but couldn't find the right situation to do all that she wanted to do. After several years of working in the field of children and youth services, she realized that despite all of the programs available, there were still things missing. "Families and youth had needs that weren't being met because the relevant programs simply didn't exist. That is what motivated me to start *Blind Beginnings* and though we still have a lot of work ahead of us, I think we are on the right path. We've accomplished a lot since 2008. We are finally at the point where we are in position to launch some exciting programs and I have to thank the many friends and families involved with *Blind Beginnings* for continuing to support us over the past two years. Without your help, this would have been a much more difficult journey."

So what does the future hold for *Blind Beginnings*?

"I would like to see our organization continue to grow

so that children and youth who are blind or visually impaired and their families have all the resources they need to be the best they can be. But my ultimate dream is that one day, people who are blind do not have to educate others or ask for accommodations because the world will be understanding and accepting of blindness and visual impairment."



***Blind Beginnings* Has A New Home!**

Not only is *Blind Beginnings* launching our new newsletter, we've also found a new home. In March, we moved into our new office at 93 Sixth St. in New Westminster!

We are renting a small office from the Western Society for Children (WSFC), and also have access to the remainder of their space including; a resource library for parents, a children's sensory room, a small kitchen and a board room. This space will be used to host upcoming workshops for parents and youth. "We could not be happier about this partnership and are confident

Youth Leaders Now Trained!

Thanks to the generosity of Westminster Savings, Coast Capital Savings, and Ventana Construction, 13 *Blind Beginnings* youth from various regions of BC were trained as Youth Leaders as part of our exciting new Youth Leadership Network this spring! The program was created for youth to develop skills including public speaking, community presentations, communications, mentoring, active listening and empathy, organization and time management, team building and leadership. Now that these Youth Leaders are trained, they will be given opportunities to be role models or mentors to younger children who are blind, provide awareness presentations in their communities, and assist in the planning of group outings and special events. The objective of this program is to provide youth with transferable skills and volunteer experience that will assist them in their future employment pursuits. Through the mentor-matching process, we hope to provide younger children who are blind or visually impaired with opportunities to enhance self-esteem and set higher personal goals. If you are a parent of a child who is blind or visually impaired and you would like to be matched with a Youth Leader either for your child or yourself, or if there is a need for a Blindness Awareness presentation in your community please contact us. We will do our best to match mentors according to eye condition and location when possible.

THE i FACTOR

Want to be famous?

For the second year in a row, CNIB is inviting Canadians with vision loss who are 16 or older to upload a video of themselves singing or playing a musical instrument.

The 10 semi-finalists, chosen by a panel of judges, will be whisked to Lake Joe to receive expert music and performance coaching and will compete on August 7th for the right to be one of the top 5 to compete in a live showdown on August 10th in Toronto! The contest winner will perform as the opening act for Juno-nominee Terry Kelly at a concert of his choosing! So if you've ever wanted to make it big, check out www.theifactor.ca for more details! Good luck!

Are You a Member?

Membership with *Blind Beginnings* is just \$10 per year for an individual, \$15 for a professional or \$25 per year for a family. You must be a member to take part in all of our programs, vote at our AGM and be covered by our insurance.



Campers get a hands-on look at some sea life during a summer camp.

that members of both our organizations will benefit.” said Shawn.

WSFC exists to support children with disabilities and their families by helping them find funding for specialized needs, such as equipment or therapy, and by providing educational and emotional support. The organization also plays an advocacy role in the community by promoting the needs of children with disabilities and their families.

Blind Beginnings Annual General Meeting Set for Saturday, May 29th.

Our AGM will be held from 11:30am to 1:30pm at the party room of the townhouse complex on Mayview Circle near Burris and Canada Way. Most of our members have already been here as it was the site of our AGM last year, but if you need more specific directions, please call Shawn.

To start off the event, we'd like to have a potluck lunch starting at 11:30am so please bring a dish to share with everyone. The actual AGM will start at 1:00pm. Volunteers will be present for childcare during the meeting so you can come and enjoy visiting with other families before the meeting.

Remember that only current members of *Blind Beginnings* can vote so if you need to get a membership or just want to confirm that your membership is up-to-date, please contact Shawn.

Blind Beginnings is committed to representing the needs of children and youth who are blind and visually impaired and their families. To achieve this, we want to have a minimum of 60% of our Board of Directors to have a direct link with blindness either personally or through a family member. We would like to expand



our Board and so if you are interested, including any youth members, to submit a letter to Shawn outlining why they would like to be a member. Experience in fund-raising, accounting, human resources, marketing or event planning would be an asset, but more importantly, we are looking for people who are committed to our vision of helping blind and visually impaired children and youth to reach their full potential. Following the May 20th submission deadline, our Nominations Committee will review all the letters of intent and will present a slate of nominees at the AGM. Board meetings are held on the first Thursday of every month at the *Blind Beginnings* office starting at 7:00pm.

Come to the *Run For Light* in Support of *BC Blind Sports*!

BC Blind Sports is the only provincial sport organization specifically for people who are blind and visually impaired. One of their biggest



events is the *Run For Light*! This year, the family-friendly event will be held on Friday, May 28th at Lumberman's Arch in Stanley Park. The course covers an easy 4.3km course and you can walk or run, whatever you choose! The warm-up starts at 9:00pm with the actual event starting at 9:30pm. Why so late, you ask? Well, because

every participant receives a glow-in-the-dark t-shirt and glow stick! Seeing hundreds of others glowing as the darkness falls is more than a little bit cool! And if you enter, you're automatically entered to win one of the many draw prizes

made after the run! It's a great family event and supports programs for people who are blind or visually impaired so come out and have some fun while supporting a very worthy cause! Cost is just \$16 for children under 12, \$24 for youth 12 to 18 and \$26 for adults. There is a 10% discount for groups of 4 or more. For more information about the *Run For Light*, or to register, go to the *BC Blind Sports* website at www.bcblindsports.bc.ca or give them a call at 604-325-8638.

BC Blind Sports offers a variety of activities adapted for people who are blind or visually impaired. Ever wanted to go for a bike ride with friends or family? *BC Blind Sports* can get you a tandem bike. Want to join your buddies for a round of golf? *BC Blind Sports* can show you how. How about take part on your school track and field team? *BC Blind Sports* can help you there too! They offer 11 different sport programs and you can participate on any level - recreationally or competitively. So get active!

Tell Us What You Want....

We want this newsletter to be a valuable resource for everyone so we're looking for input!



What would you like to see? What about articles on different eye conditions? Or how about a column for you to send in questions you just can't find an answer for and we'll try and find someone

who can answer them. How is the layout and the font size working for you? Please let us know so we can make the newsletter everything you need! Send us an email or give us a call....

How To Contact *Blind Beginnings*

Suite 102 - 93 Sixth Street, New Westminster, BC V3L 2Z8

604 - 434 - 7243

Toll free 1 - 866 - 736 - 8620

www.blindbeginnings.ca

shawn@blindbeginnings.ca

	may	june	july	august
<p>Stay up to date! Keep this calendar handy so you won't miss out on anything we've got planned! However, please check our website regularly in case add more events. For more details, please feel free to contact us!</p>	<p>Ongoing Summer camp registrations due.</p> <p>28 BC Blind Sports' Run for Light in Stanley Park. CNIB Youth Group will be there!</p> <p>29 Annual General Meeting</p>	<p>Ongoing Summer camp registrations due</p>	<p>4 - 10 Braille Literacy camp.</p> <p>13 - 19 CNIB Teen camp</p> <p>22 - 26 Camp Hornby</p> <p>28 - August 3 CNIB Fine Arts Camp</p>	<p>12 - 15 CNIB Family camp</p>