

Braille Without Borders

Quarterly newsletter 3 -2017



Dear friends and supporters,

The year 2017 was and is a very turbulent year for our Tibet project.

Through some publications in the press you may have heard that last summer, we, Paul and I had to leave Tibet on the third day of August, and that the Braille Without Borders preparatory school as well as the vocational training farm, was endangered of being closed.

We had expected that the agreement with our local counterpart (which is needed to work in China) would not be extended. For a few years now, we have been one of the last foreign NGO's working in Tibet. And it was only a matter of time before we had to hand-over our projects to the local government. However we had hoped to get a sufficient amount of time for this transfer. After all, it affects four projects with more than 200 students and trainees.

So what happened?

Since December 2016, we tried to return to Tibet to work on a proper handover. However, our counterpart was seemingly not in a hurry to provide a required letter of invitation. Without such a letter it is not possible to apply for a Visa and without a visa it would not be possible to get the additionally required 'Tibet Entry Permit'.

Only three weeks before the contract expired, we finally got our travel permits.

Once in Tibet, the president and staff of our counterpart the Tibet Disabled Persons Federation (TDPF) were avoiding us. However, because we had travelled many thousands of kilometres, we insisted on an official meeting. We wanted to make sure that a hand over was done properly and that the future of our students and colleagues would look promising. While waiting for a first meeting which took many days, we enjoyed being together with our highly motivated colleagues, blind students and graduates. Especially the first generation of students, who we have raised and now are around their thirties, spent a lot of time with us. Many of them founded own families and started their own professions. Dachung, who you might know from the documentary BLINDSIGHT, at the time of the climbing blind expedition he was the youngest climber at 14, is now running a company that employs around 15 blind people. They work in either one of three massage clinics, are musicians in a band that performs daily or work in his Braille printing press. Tendsin, our first student, heads his medical massage clinic with more than 20 employees. Kunga started a tea house, and Nyima and Gyendzen run the Braille Without borders preparatory school in Lhasa.

And Kyila? Kyila started a wonderful integrative kindergarten. 25 children, blind and sighted, some orphans of the terrible 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, lived with her and 6 other employees in a compound in Lhasa. They all, blind or sighted, learned Braille and the blind were trained intensively in daily living and mobility skills. After the kindergarten they either integrated themselves directly into a mainstream school or joined the bwb preparatory school.

Unfortunately, Kiki's kindergarten was recently closed. Remarkably, by the same authorities who have been supporting Kyila's work for many years. This came as a huge shock for Kyila and of course also for us. We wondered what would happen to our bwb school and swayed between confidence and anxiety.

With a gloomy premonition we travelled to our vocational training farm in Shigatse, about 250 km from Lhasa. There, all students who are part of the self-integration program gave us an unexpected surprise. Despite having their summer holidays they came to the farm to see us and share their experiences. Over 80 students had already successfully integrated themselves into mainstream primary-, middle- and high-schools as well as in universities. They integrate themselves without depending on assistance of social workers. They can do so because they were well prepared for this. At BWB they learned to read, write and speak in three languages, acquired basic mathematical skills, learned to use computers as well as daily living skills in order to be able to take life independently into their own hands. They are mobile and have learned to solve their own

problems. These skills make them self-confident, not just as "taking" but also "giving" members in society. Adron, who leads the BWB vocational training farm, proudly informed us that our blind students are not only tolerated, they are very much accepted and liked, both by sighted students as well as their teachers. Why? Because they are good at school and because they raise the general level. None of the sighted students wants to be beaten in his/her grades by these blind students. So they study harder!

After a few years the "self-integration project" model got copied to other provinces of China. This has resulted in more blind students having been able to independently join regular schools and universities. Something that only a decade ago was still unthinkable.

The vocational training methods developed in the training farm, from cheese production, baking bread, animal husbandry, organic farming, compost production to craftsmanship, have also proved to be successful. Many trainees were able to become self-employed.

The local government adopted the farm to their favourite picnic spot, and Chinese businessmen invested in infrastructure: Solar hot water systems, a music hall with a stage and a sound studio, an accessible internet café and even a blind-friendly football pitch.

All these actions gave us the impression that, with or without us, the projects would continue in the interest of the blind in Tibet. But little did we know what our counterpart had in mind. A few days after we returned to our school in Lhasa, a staff member of the Tibet Disabled Persons Federation handed us an agreement that we were supposed to sign. This contract was not a pledge that the government would take-over the school and farm. On the contrary, this agreement stated the following:

· The preparatory school and the vocational training farm were going to be closed · Our Tibetan partner (TDPF) would decide what to do with the assets, furniture, Vehicles and buildings (that BWB paid for), · the students were to be transferred to 'special schools'. · The copyright of everything we have produced over the past 19 years, pictures, videos, books would be co-owned by TDPF · and we were not allowed to publish anything about our experiences during our entire stay in Tibet (so the period covering 1998 to 2017). Above these paragraphs it was written that this contract was 'drafted in friendship', after all, we had successfully worked together for 19 years!

As you might imagine, this came as a big shock. Especially because we had included a few safety clauses in the previous agreement: as they were: -In case that that agreement would not be extended, then all activities would continue under the patronage of the Tibet Disabled Person's Federation under the condition that they would continue using the concept and the self-integration program that were developed by BWB. - In case this could not be guaranteed, then a third party would be found who could guarantee this, and the projects would be handed over to that party, and - If that were not possible, the assets were to be sold and the proceeds to be returned to BWB to be used for training blind children elsewhere. We of course did NOT sign the agreement that was now offered to us.

Because in Tibet there is no alternative training similar to the one we created we had assumed, that TDPF would take over the responsibility. Unfortunately, we have not reckoned with their inability. Our motto, "Empower the blind before they become disabled," did not seem to be understood by them. Instead, now everything were to be closed and the blind students to be transferred to 'special schools', facilities where there is no special training for the blind and because of that these children would not be able to integrate themselves into regular schools and later into society.

During the second half of July, the press came to know about the threat of the projects going to be closed down. Several newspapers, radio and TV stations in China as well as the rest of the world addressed the matter. Chinese film teams interviewed our staff, students and graduates. One film team of a very popular Chinese TV channel broadcasted a new documentary about BWB. This film shows the development of the blind students over the last 15 years; the children with their dreams when they were little in 2004, and now as adults how they have turned their ideas into reality. You can see the documentary [here](#).

Additionally German, Dutch and European diplomats, as well as the German Foreign Affairs Department have been and are still very active advocating for a continuation of training of blind in Tibet with the bwb methods and concepts.

From around the world, we received letters from people who have supported our work for many years. They

all had the same questions: "Why?" "Why would the authorities do this?" Although the Chinese Government has always praised BWB as a showcase project, and even though other disability organizations elsewhere in China have adopted our self-integration methods, now everything was going to be over? Just like that? Nobody would profit from a closure of these projects.

We never got an answer on the question 'why?'. We don't know the reason.. But there are some rumours:

1. One thought is that our methods are too Western. Sure, we are influenced by the great concept of my previous school, the Karl Strehl-Schule in Marburg, a school for the blind in Germany with excellent education. However, much of our methods were developed on site, together with our local colleagues. Whether Western or not, the methods proved to be effective; intensive preparation before self-integration worked very well.
2. The building that we had acquired 19 years ago is located in the center of Lhasa. As you can imagine, this property has gained significantly in value over the past 19 years. After all, Lhasa has become a major city, the only metropolis far and wide. This awakens desires. Local businessmen have pointed out that this could be all just a 'real-estate-deal'.
3. In recent years, the Tibet disabled Persons Federation used a lot of funds to build 5 large special schools. The only thing that is 'special' about these "special schools" is that there is no 'specialization' in training for different disabilities. On the contrary, they seem to be proud to being able to accommodate all kinds of disabilities under one roof without any differentiation. Blind people do not get training in daily living-, computer skills and, of course, mobility training is much 'too dangerous'. Currently these special schools, large concrete buildings, are mostly empty and need to be filled with disabled people. This is where our blind students would serve a great purpose. However, once there, they won't be prepared for "self-integration". They stay there from the first to the tenth grade and then have no chance of any higher education. The only training that is currently offered is a three-month lasting medical massage training. That however is not sufficient to become a professional masseur. At BWB this training took three years.

As you can imagine, closure would be a drastic step backward in the development of the blind in Tibet / China.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Chinese authorities would proudly embrace these projects and allow our colleagues to continue their important work?

Everything is there; well-maintained buildings, excellently trained and motivated staff, support of the local population. What more do you want?

So what is the latest news?

It's not all over yet. We hope that the president of the Chinese Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF) in Beijing, who is disabled herself, will speak up for the continuation.

In our opinion, CDPF is one of the world's most progressive organizations. The president has publicly expressed the importance of integration and a self-determined life, and is against "disabling people with disabilities".

Till date, the preparatory school in Lhasa as well as the vocational training farm in Shigatse, are still running and our colleagues are still teaching as before. Their salaries are covered by the government. Also the diplomats are also still active; they are seeking ways that lead to a sustainable solution.

However our colleagues and also we are still worried. So far the authorities have not given any written statement what is planned for the future.

Nevertheless, we are confident that the work for and with blind people will continue as per the Braille Without Borders concept, in Tibet as well as in many other countries. Our former BWB students have promised to continue the tried and tested training methods for blind people into their own organizations. Dachung and Gyurmi run their Braille printing company, where they print schoolbooks and training materials in Tibetan, Chinese and English braille. They offer schoolbooks for students who have integrated themselves into regular schools and also offer qualitative vocational training.

Nyima and his wife Yudun, both blind and Braille Without Borders graduates, are now parents of two children. From their own experiences, they are developing a special training course for 'parenting blind'.

And Kyila? She has lost everything, except her confidence. Over the many years she has worked with us and the years that she ran her kindergarten, she has gained a lot of experience.

She now wishes to share and expand her skills by studying in Europe or in the USA with the goal to return to Tibet to enrich the pedagogy for blind and sighted children. She is very interested in alternative approaches. We would be delighted if you could give us your ideas and support.

Additionally, you can help us to maintain the pressure on the Chinese government to allow our colleagues to

continue their important work. You can do this to express your concerns about the current situation wherever you have a possibility to do so.

We are not primarily concerned about the survival of Braille Without Borders in Tibet, it is not about us or about BWB. Our main concern is the future of our colleagues and students. We are worried that a successful preparatory school, the vocational training farm and especially the "self-integration program" are still at risk to be closed.

Please know that we will continue to support blind children in the Himalayan region and beyond. We have several kanthari graduates who started projects for the blind in Nepal, India and many other countries. Your contributions will be used to further empower blind children so they can look at a better tomorrow too! Thank you very much for your support!

As you can imagine, the saying goodbye in Tibet was heart breaking. We are however grateful for all the years we were able to spend with our colleagues and students on the Himalayan Plateau. With sad but also still hopeful greetings,

sabriye and paul



Students and staff at the reunion in the vocational training farm in Shigatse

You can support the work of Braille Without Borders [here](http://www.braillewithoutborders.org) - THANK YOU VERY MUCH!
<http://www.braillewithoutborders.org>