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Resetting mindsets of the disabled



Two inspiring individuals help the handicapped bridge the digital divide.

By JO TIMBUONG

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MANY assume that the disabled are not capable of using information technology, but Selina Ooi and David Hathaway will tell you differently. Ooi was born deaf and Hathaway is blind, but they are ferocious users of technology.

They've made it their mission in life to encourage more people in the blind and deaf - communities to share their enthusiasm for technology, said Ooi, 27, who works as a multimedia engineer at Kolej Damansara Utama in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

She designs websites and oversees the college's social media activities while Hathaway is an IT trainer at the St Nicholas Home for the Visually Handicapped in Penang. Both say that technology has helped them overcome their physical handicaps.

"Technology has allowed me to stay in touch from wherever I am, and I think it allows blind people and those with low vision to compete with their sighted colleagues on a more equal footing," Hathaway, 36, and a British citizen, said.

Ooi agreed, and said that without web-chat programs like Google Talk or MSN, as well as SMS (short message service), she would have a more difficult time communicating with her hearing friends.

They regularly share their experiences with other handicapped people and try to get them using technology too.

Hathaway said some of the blind students he has met lack confidence when it comes to - technology, especially when they have had little or no experience with it. The high cost of technology can also be a hindering factor, according to him.

"From my experiences in Malaysia, the blind community here does not always have access to the latest equipment. This could be due to cost or the time it takes to become proficient in its use," he said.

"Tools and gadgets are there to be used, so we should never be afraid to play with them to explore their capabilities. I find it sad that some in the community only use 10% of the capabilities of their assistive technologies."

For the blind, there are assistive technologies that can help them overcome their disability. For example, a screen-reader program helps the visually handicapped use a computer by reading out all the text on the screen.

However, new technologies such as touchscreen devices are often perceived as difficult, if not impossible, for the blind to operate because there is no keyboard for them to feel their way through.

Hathaway disagreed. One of his favourite devices is his iPhone, which he uses everyday in a variety of situations and finds it both intuitive and user friendly. It has a screen reader program. There is a steep learning curve for someone who is blind, but that shouldn't be a reason for a disabled person to dismiss touchscreen technology altogether.

"Touchscreen devices will be even more common in the future, so we need to learn to use them. Blind people, like all other users of technology, need to be prepared to accept new paradigms," he said.



SHOW ME: Hathaway talking to a participant at a computer class conducted at the St Nicholas Home in Penang while assistant trainer Muhammad Amir Teh (right) listens.

Go for IT

Ooi said it's important for the deaf to keep an open mind about technology and not think that it is something they will never be able to master.

"Technology helps open doors. There are many good products and services that the deaf can use to communicate with others, as well as perform work tasks," she said. Ooi would like to see more in the deaf community playing strong roles in companies and earning - salaries good enough to enable them to afford their own homes.

But she knows that this may take much time and effort to make happen. "Many in the - community don't think they are good enough or they are too scared to try. I'm trying to change those perceptions," said Ooi.

Also, she has set up a blog - www.deafboleh.blogspot.com - which aims to raise IT awareness among the deaf. Her blog especially covers tech news for people who are hearing impaired, as well as highlights applications that are useful to the deaf.



SIGN IT: Ooi (left) deep in conversation with her sister Jocelyn using sign language.

Ooi also gives regular talks to the deaf community to encourage them to set their personal goals higher.

She is very passionate about her cause and always encourages others in the community to try for a qualification in Information Technology. "I am proud to note that some are studying for a diploma in IT at the Multimedia University in Cyberjaya," she said.

Meanwhile, Hathaway is helping with a St Nicholas IT training programme that aims to help the blind and visually impaired upgrade their IT skills. He himself is proof that the blind can have a career in IT, and he believes that others like him can also enjoy success.

"But first, there needs to be a shift in mindset and attitude. For Malaysia to be proud of its blind IT professionals, the blind need to be motivated enough to want it," he said. "Also, the academia and IT staff need to be willing to provide help and support when necessary." He is always saddened to learn of cases where fully qualified, but blind, individuals were dissuaded from studying IT in some universities.

"Perhaps, Government intervention may be necessary to prevent cases such as these," he said. Ooi and Hathaway's personal journeys to overcome their handicaps and embrace technology were not easy.

She earned her degree in Interface Design and Creative Multimedia at the Multimedia University in Cyberjaya. Known in the deaf community and blogsphere as "The Deaf Geek," she was the first deaf student to be enrolled in the university.

Despite a lack of tools for teaching deaf students, she managed. "There were no sign-language interpreting services then, but my lecturers used picture slides to present the lessons so that made things easier for me," Ooi said.

Also, her classmates helped whenever they could. "They couldn't communicate in sign - language, so we wrote on paper to converse," she said. Lecture notes were also put online, which made it easier for her to follow the lessons. "I printed these out and read the notes before class the next day," she recalled.

If she had to clarify any points in the lessons with her lecturers, Ooi had to also resort to pen and paper. Hathaway said he started with a foundational programming and software development course at Temple University in Japan, and then earned a Masters in Information Security from the University of London's Royal Holloway College.

"My lecturers were helpful and I think they looked at me as a challenge. I was the first blind student at Royal Holloway College so I knew I had to get the best results I could," he said. "I love gadgets and technology and I push any device to the limits to find out what it can and cannot do. After all, there's a reset button so what have I to fear," he said with a smile.