**THE BALANCE ANNUAL NEWSLETTER!**

**BALANCE Announces Newsletter Naming Contest!**

We are pleased to announce that BALANCE participants will have the opportunity to win a prize by submitting your suggestion(s) for a new name for our newsletter. The client newsletter will now be an annual item, released every December by email. We would like it to have a nice new name, one that represents well who we are as an organization, the services we provide, and our mission and vision. Please submit your name suggestions by email to Deborah at d.gold@balancefba.org by Wednesday December 20. BALANCE staff will vote on the names.

First Prize: $50 Shopper’s Gift Card

Second Runner-Up: $20 Tim Horton’s Gift Card

Good luck to all! Winners announced by the end of January.

**Message from the BALANCE Board Chair**

By Bob Stark

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the wonderful staff at BALANCE for their hard work over the past year improving the lives of our clients. There has been much change and consistently staff have risen to the challenge and dedicated themselves to their jobs. And thank you to our Executive Director, Deborah for her strong leadership and her relentless pursuit of opportunities to make BALANCE more relevant to our clients. It has been a good year of hard work and much positive change!

We have seen significant change on the Board as well. Meena Venkatesan announced her retirement as Board Chair in the summer after leading BALANCE through a number of challenging years. Thank you Meena for your wonderful leadership and complete commitment to the organization! We recruited 4 strong new Board members and have a diverse, skilled and dedicated Board of Directors.

We continue to pursue our five key strategic priorities:

I) **Enhance our internal organizational capacity** (management leadership, governance capacity, human resource capacity, ensuring quality services are provided to clients),

II) **Strengthen the organization's core services capacity**, building greater capacity in the access to technology and rehabilitation services and strengthening the integration of these core services with other related community service providers,

III) **Create robust external stakeholder relationships and partnerships**, in line with the LHIN priorities of collaboration and integration,

IV) **Build capacity in the community**, by acting as a useful resource to community providers and support groups also serving our participants, and

V) **Build Brand recognition** by developing and enhancing our marketing and communication strategies.

We’ve experienced a strong interest in client focused and community oriented opportunities. In the past year:

* The Board conducted two telephone town halls and heard from a number of people what makes BALANCE great and what opportunities we should consider for the future.
* Our Annual General Meeting in September focused on information sharing and created a strong dialogue.
* A successful Community Information Fair in the fall brought together about 20 service providing organizations and a large number of BALANCE clients where information was shared in an integrated manner.

Community events will figure prominently in our plans as will opportunities to partner and make it easier for our clients to access community services.

To all the past and present Board members, thank you for your dedicated time and support to uphold the organization.

We also thank the Toronto Central LHIN and in particular Gillian Bone, for her continued support and guidance.

It is a privilege to serve as Board Chair and I am most grateful for the opportunity!

**An Interview with BALANCE**

by Deborah Gold

Interviewer: Hey BALANCE, you really have changed a LOT this year, it’s like you put on a brand new dress and then went out on the town in it! Where did you go and what did you do?

BALANCE: Well, yes, actually, we really HAVE changed a lot, and I have to say it feels great. We have new energy, new enthusiasm and new approaches to the way we do things in order to make it easier for staff and clients!

Interviewer: like what?

BALANCE: Well, we’ve basically done just a few key things that have made a world of difference in the way we do business. 1. We purchased a new client relations management system, and we are now using it to track client activity. This makes working remotely a lot easier, as the system is hosted on the company’s website, and so it can be accessed from anywhere. It is easy to use and will eventually lend itself to better client activity reports. And 2. We’ve adopted a philosophy of “let’s try it.” This approach means that staff wanting to try new things usually get a “yes” rather than “let’s see” or “we can’t” or “maybe later.” With the “yes”comes the responsibility to make sure the program or service takes place, and our staff have really been amazing with all of this.

Interviewer: well, what things have you tried this year?

BALANCE: We tried on a LOT of new dresses as it were! Let’s see now, we welcomed the idea of “iPhone workshops” (see Rosie’s article about this) teaching everything from apps about nutrition to apps about having someone see things “for” you, to apps about getting increased mobility and then more! We also said “yes” to trying out a “pre-employment program” (see Chelsea’s article) this summer, which was a huge success for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the ongoing connection we created with the participants! And we said “yes” to new wellness groups, too, including our extremely well-received “Sharing Space Support Group” which is, well, exactly that, run by a professional counsellor who is an MSW living with vision loss, Lisa Derencinovic; and when our yoga instructor spoke to us about how Mindfulness training might help our clients, we jumped at the chance to offer that too. And we held our first ever Community Information Fair, to try and get a lot of info out to our clients, in person, all in one place at one time. It was a huge success!

Interviewer: I think you have literally been going “out on the town” with all these new programs…can you give me some examples of how you’ve taken your show down some new roads?

BALANCE: Yep! Our pilot project with the Metro Library (Reference Library) has gone really well, and we are looking to renew the agreement soon. One staff member has regularly held lessons there, and having this location available to us has been a huge step for BALANCE and permitted clients to access our services without coming all the way to our west end office, or having us come to their homes. In addition we have an agreement with West Toronto Support Services to offer groups in their lovely multi-purpose room!

Interviewer: This is a LOT of new stuff, it’s very exciting! Can you give us a bit of a sneak preview about what’s coming up at BALANCE?

BALANCE: Well, we’re going to try on some very exciting new wardrobe pieces and take them for a spin! In the winter we will have 3 great new workshop series on offer! In January, we’ll start our Women’s Empowerment Group “BALANCing the Power” and this 7 part series (see our ad in this newsletter) will provide a safe space to discuss issues related to being an urban woman with vision loss (contact Chelsea ext. 225); In January we will also launch our first-ever Falls Prevention 8 part workshop series, with our yoga instructor Fazia and one of our O/M instructors, Anita Laurnitus (contact Anita at ext. 228); and in March, we will partner with CCB and Opera Atelier to host a 4 part workshop series on Baroque Opera, with fully accessible teaching by the directors at Opera Atelier, and a free ticket to the opera when all is said and done, for those who participate in all 4 sessions (maximum 12 spaces in this one)!

Interviewer: Wow, you really are going great guns over there…it’s so great to see what BALANCE has achieved this year and what you have up your sleeve in the coming months!

BALANCE: Well, we need to just take a moment to thank our clients and staff, and our Board members for all their ongoing support to help us dress up in new clothes and go out on the town!!! Toronto deserves a “BALANCEd” approach to living with vision loss, and we’re here to provide it!

And by the way, don’t forget to follow us on Facebook and Twitter @balancefba is our Twitter handle.

**BALANCE Client Survey Results**

By Holly Pearson, OT Intern

BALANCE clients were asked to participate in an anonymous survey to help BALANCE staff gain a better understanding of clients’ needs related to our programs and services. This will help BALANCE staff support clients on a more individualized level. Out of 135 clients who received services from BALANCE within the past three years, 67 clients agreed to participate in the survey.

The results highlighted that the majority of clients that BALANCE serves are female, between the ages of 36 and 55, who live alone and receive ODSP as their main source of income. Overall, the findings indicate that clients appreciate how staff at BALANCE pay individual attention to their specific needs. Clients are especially satisfied with the quality of instruction and the pace of the sessions.

Our major findings from the survey highlight that the main challenges clients are facing revolve around finances and unemployment. It is therefore not surprising that BALANCE clients report the need for an employment support program tailored to people who are visually impaired and for more networking opportunities within the blind community. Some clients also requested that a volunteer program be implemented at BALANCE to promote more daily support for people who are visually impaired.

The community access facilitation (CAF) service was found to be least common service received at BALANCE; however, clients are reporting a need for more connections with community resources. This is interesting as it aligns with the finding around clients’ request for BALANCE to be more explicit in marketing the services we offer. Survey participants feel as if they are not informed enough about what BALANCE has to offer, indicating that BALANCE will need to find alternative ways to communicate with our clients to advertise our services in the future; and/or we must examine who is receiving CAF, and see who needs it as well.

In addition, most survey participants have identified that they need to increase their proficiency with access technology skills. This aligns with their suggestions to continue the AT program and to ensure that we are up to date with the latest technologies. This survey highlighted the specific needs that BALANCE clients report and provides us with some insight into the next steps for BALANCE’s service planning. Thank you to all who participated!

**Technology focused workshops at BALANCE!**

--by Rosie Arcuri

This year, the Assistive Technology team was pleased to bring you 14 workshops focused on mainstream and of course assistive tech. These informative workshops had two main purposes. Firstly, we increased our clients’ knowledge on how they could use their computers or smartphones to: shop, bank, network, use Google and more. In today’s society, most people use technology to perform many daily tasks.

Having a visual impairment does not have to be an obstacle that prevents our clients from benefiting from technology. On the contrary, technology can be a tool that increases the independence of people with visual impairments. Banking can be accessible and easy with just the simple download of an app to your iPhone or other device. Locating information about where the latest movie is playing, or what to order for dinner can be simple if you know just the right digital platform to utilize! Mobile applications (better known as “apps”) and websites to help you do your shopping can open up a world of independence for those who are living with vision loss!

Our second purpose was to focus on apps, tools and tips that can specifically help people with visual impairments. For instance, we discussed using apps for navigation, how to master editing skills using adaptive software; and, how to advocate successfully for yourself using a variety of social media platforms.

The workshops were co-created and co-facilitated by assistive technology instructors Chelsea Mohler and Rosie Arcuri who live with vision loss and have first-hand experience using technology to navigate their community and facilitate independence.

If you are interested in these opportunities for the future, keep checking back at the BALANCE website under “Courses and Workshops”. Typically, the workshops last two hours and provide a very informative overview of a topic, while leaving room for questions and discussion. The workshops give insight on what is possible, and tips on how to use technology to the fullest. In the new year, we’ll be pleased to offer a 3 part series on the WheelTrans application and booking processes, part 1 on how to apply and using the application; part 2 on how to book online, and part 3 on how to use your Smartphone to book a trip! Stay tuned for more exciting news and send your ideas our way by contacting Rosie Arcuri at ext. 230.

**iPhone Classes-How did we do?**

--by Doug Poirier

Over the past year, BALANCE has run four different iPhone group classes specifically focusing on the use of the iPhone and various productivity and Independent Living tools made available through iOS. Approximately twenty clients benefited directly through their attendance of the sessions.

The idea of such a class was to provide an environment where useful apps could be demonstrated and discussed with emphasis placed on independent living. Although each class had specific learning objectives, it was not our intent to curtail the discussions provoked through the various lessons.

It was quite interesting to see how the four separate groups worked together as they progressed through their lessons supporting each other and providing assistance when necessary. This was exactly what we were hoping for when we decided to host these classes.

The feedback that we have received from those participating has been both positive and constructive and we are grateful for it.

We are still receiving requests for such classes and as long as the demand is there, it is our intent to continue to provide them. Learning in a group setting is a nice alternative to our individual lessons, and permits participants to support each other

If you are interested in such classes, please contact Chelsea Mohler c.mohler@balancefba.org, or Doug Poirier d.poirier@balancefba.org.

**What the heck is ShareVision?**

--by Bill Phung

Happy holidays all. I’ve been working on configuring ShareVision, our new client relations management system, over the summer and fall months and we recently launched the system for staff use in October. All the staff are getting accustomed to the new system and it has been very positive and well received. There are still some kinks to work out and things are getting adjusted as we figure out what works best and what can be improved. The system is streamlined and allows the BALANCE staff to efficiently take care of their administrative tasks so that they can spend more time doing fun things like holding workshops for clients. It will also permit efficient reporting in the future, so that we can project our participant involvement and plan our programs to better meet client needs.

As we move forward with the new system, clients might be contacted to have their information updated. For clients who have had a change in address or phone number, or plan on changing their email addresses, please let us know of this change so we can update this right away.

Have a happy, warm and safe winter.

--Bill

**BALANCE Summer Pre-Employment Program**

--by Chelsea Mohler, M.Sc.

This summer, BALANCE embarked on a new and exciting program—the Summer Pre-Employment Program (or PEP) for short. The PEP was developed and run by assistive technology instructors Chelsea Mohler and Rosie Arcuri, with the support of the amazing team at BALANCE! The program was geared to youth living with vision loss in the GTA who had completed their education and were seeking gainful employment.

This unique program consisted of two, separate one-week intensive sessions, the first of which focused on skills for pre-employment (such as goal setting, creating an action plan, and developing your personal image). The second session focused on incorporating mainstream and adaptive technology into the job search process. Both weeks incorporated outings into the community where participants were afforded the opportunity to learn about services such as: Employment Services for Disabled Persons at SCI-Ontario; using the resources available at the Toronto Public Library; and, Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work. What distinguished this pre-employment program from other programs in the community was the specific focus on vision-related challenges when job searching. In addition, program participants were offered one-on-one coaching during the program with on-going follow-up support for a subsequent 3 months! Participants of the program commented that having instructors with lived experience job searching as someone with vision loss added to the value and meaning of the program. Both instructors thoroughly enjoyed facilitating the program and hope to run the program again next year!

**New Groups Coming soon to BALANCE!**

**Balancing the Power: a Vibrant Discussion Group for Women who are Blind and Partially Sighted!**

Are you interested in connecting with other urban women living with vision loss? Are you interested in learning about and sharing your experiences with issues facing women with vision loss?

BALANCE is pleased to offer a discussion group for women, with the theme of empowerment. Facilitated by Chelsea Mohler\*, with a number of excellent guest speakers, the group will start on Tuesday, January 10, 2018 and will run for 7 weeks, ending February 20. Sessions will be held from 2 until 4 PM at the Four Villages Community Health Centre, located at 1700 Bloor St. W., in the Multi-purpose room. The theme of this series is empowerment of women who are blind and partially sighted, through discussion of key issues in a safe and supportive setting. This group will address issues such as: networking as someone with vision loss; online safety when dating or using social media; mental wellness, self-esteem and body image; developing your personal image and style (even on a tight budget); violence prevention and self-defence specifically for women with vision loss; and relationships, dating, and the intersection of disability. Come on out and check out the group! If interested, please contact Chelsea at c.mohler@balancefba.org

or 416.236.1796 X. 225 for more information or to sign up. We are happy to provide orientation in advance of the series to anyone requiring assistance to locate the Four Villages Health Centre. A commitment to all 7 sessions is expected in order to preserve the “safe setting” philosophy. (Exceptions to be discussed with the facilitator.) Please respond if interested no later than December 22, 2017.

\*Chelsea Mohler, M.A., is an Assistive Technology Instructor at BALANCE, lives with vision loss herself, and was co-facilitator of BALANCE’s pre-employment program for young adults in 2017. Chelsea holds a Master’s degree in Occupational Science from Western University, and has been instructing adults in 1:1 lessons, leading workshops and teaching groups for 5 years.

**Learning about Preventing Slips, Trips and Falls**

An 8 part class series specifically designed for adults who are blind or partially sighted, this group will run from January 16 to March 6, at West Toronto Support Services, on Tuesday afternoons from 2-3:30 p.m. (shortly after yoga class completes each Tuesday). The instructors will be Anita Laurnitus, Orientation and Mobility Instructor, and Fazia Ackbarali, Yoga Instructor. Topics will include the many tips and strategies for creating a safe environment, and for navigating safely as a blind person, as well as: foot care, proper footwear, coordination, balance/stability, environmental awareness strategies, strengthening core and leg muscles, and what to do if there is a fall, and if there is an injury also. If you have tripped, slipped or fallen in the past year, are not going out now because you are afraid of falling, or have attended a falls prevention course that did not address your needs as a blind person, then this program is for you! You will be our first participants, and thus will help us shape this new group program! There is a maximum of 10 places for this, so we require a commitment to attend at least 6 of the 8 sessions, and we will require a minimum of 4 participants to run the program, due to the amount of preparation work to make it a success. To register and complete the telephone based questionnaire, contact Anita at ext. 228 by Friday January 4 at the latest, leave a message and she will call you back.

We are so pleased to be able to offer you new programs related to wellness. Always check our website under “Courses and Workshops” or look out for our emails promoting all our new groups, workshops, and class series.

**Donate to BALANCE!**

Would you like to help BALANCE continue to enhance and improve our programs and services? With your help, we can make an even bigger difference in the lives of Toronto residents who are blind or partially sighted. Remit your cheque with the form below, and we will be most happy to issue you a tax receipt for any donation of $20 or more. Thank-you! Thank you for supporting BALANCE in helping people who are blind and vision-impaired reach their goals. Donations can be made by sending your cheque in by mail or dropping it off at 2340 Dundas St. West, Unit G-06, Toronto, M6P 4A9.

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\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*