

Executive Director’s Annual Report

For this report, I decided the staff should be the ones to reflect on our achievements in 2019-20, and when I asked them to do so, they definitely covered all the bases. Each response represents their own perspective on the organization and on what stands out to them from the last year, however I have to say that I agree with them all; it was an incredible year for BALANCE, and by asking all the staff to talk about the highlights, I was able to see just how successful we were . Over to the staff now!

Several staff talked about our Holiday Open House.

Doug wrote, “I think you should mention something about the holiday open house which I believe was quite a success with all the activities we planned. Good turn out as well. I think the way we combined O&M indoor route training using the iPhone compass together with AT instruction demonstrating the Seeing AI app was quite original.” He didn’t mention that we did this by planning a scavenger hunt in our mall that went really well.

Monika agreed with Doug about the open house, adding, “It’s great to have so many people coming out and enjoying each other’s company. As a bonus, there was a lot of collaboration [when] putting it together and we included great activities.” She agreed with Doug about combination AT/O&M activity which we heard from everyone was fun as well as educational.”

People enjoyed the open house immensely, and perhaps not in 2020, but in 2021 we will be able to hold another wonderfully successfully in-person event like this.

Collaboration was a bit of a theme in many of the staff members’ comments. For example, Monika also wrote about our approach to client visits: “For me, the greatest achievement would be the way we support our clients through the client visits/lessons… In particular, I recall fondly when we were able to collaborate either before or during appointments, bringing together the diverse expertise of our team for our clients with complex needs.”

In line with this, Cristina and Elizabeth wrote about several other collaborative efforts, as exemplified by the partnership with Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work to create an opportunity for blind young people to participate with support in CCRW’s Youth the Future program, funded by a grant from the United Way. This partnership, and the funding, were as Elizabeth noted, first of their kind for both organizations. Cristina wrote: “For myself, the highlights I’ve experienced over the last 11 months with Balance would have to start with The Insight Project; observing the program participants encouraging each other to step outside of their comfort zones and strive for success as they develop the dynamics of a group. It was a privilege to watch them work together all with varying abilities, capabilities and life experiences proving that with understanding, patience and some creative thinking, we can make more programs and workplaces accessible. I really enjoyed modifying icebreakers to promote an inclusive environment for all the participants and going to meet with employers to encourage hiring youth with sight loss while providing ideas on how to make the workplace more accessible to those wishing to obtain employment.”

But collaboration isn’t just about working with external partners of course. Cristina went on to talk about our own internal team collaboration, echoing Monika’s words about how our staff work together. Cristina wrote, “I think it is refreshing to see a team who collaborates so well together in brainstorming new program ideas and events that engage clients, as well as finding alternative solutions that support clients… The team at Balance has not only been supportive of their clients but of each other as well.”

Naomi wrote about another type of collaboration, that is, the incredible partnerships we created in the past year with post-secondary institutions. We had a record number of students at BALANCE, from several different programs, and we were so pleased to be able to provide so many with practical experiences required for their diplomas and degrees. We heard many positive comments from our clients about having students present during lessons and assisting them with groups and events, and we would like to thank all the students who helped us do more and do better this year. Naomi wrote this: “…We certainly lead the way last year in education. We took on a lot of students, and we also provided [several comprehensive training labs], workshops [and information sessions] for students entering the helping professions!” And Bill referred to his experience supervising his first Orientation and Mobility student, an experience that was so positive that we ended up hiring her to replace Anita while she has been on maternity leave! Vanessa reflected on her arrival as a student, saying “My favorite memory was when I first started at BALANCE, everyone made me feel so welcomed and part of the team immediately.”

Bill wrote that it was also special because he was able to co-supervise with his own former field supervisor, again another superb example of our collaborative spirit this past year!

Bill, along with Anita, wrote to me about how all of our special group experiences stand out for them, in particular, both the Self-Defense series and the High Park Nature Centre outing. These were indeed, our two best attended groups ever. Anita had this to say about the self-defense program: “I was so happy we offered self-defense. It was such a need for a lot of my clients who felt vulnerable when they travelled.” And Bill commented that holding the Self Defense program was very unique, which it was. It was the first ever long form specialized self-defense program for blind adults to be held in the world, according to the specialist who provided it for us). He also said, “I only attended a couple of sessions but I could see the clients really enjoyed them, especially the first session, where I showed up and everyone lit up as they wanted me to help with being a blocker (aka the punching bag for their moves)!” Anita wrote this about the High Park Nature Centre event: “I also really enjoyed the High Park outing. It was well received by our clients and well supported by our volunteers.  I really enjoy our group outings because they are different then the everyday teaching that we do.  It’s a nice change of pace.” I agree with you Anita, it certainly is. And, as volunteer coordinator, Anita was responsible for ensuring that reliable volunteers were on hand to assist with these group sessions, so we thank you for that. Also commenting on our group programming, Monika wanted to give “a shout out to the Soundscape Workshops. What a great collaboration with classroom and practical learning to enable people to more confidently be out in the community.” These were again, very popular group training opportunities, and we thank Microsoft Soundscape, and also CNIB for their collaboration as we developed and delivered them. We even delivered one of these after the pandemic lockdown, virtually! We could not do the practical sessions, but the theory was successfully delivered this way back in April.

Radka wrote to us from the Czech Republic. I wasn’t surprised to hear that stand-out achievements for the organization were our benefit concert and Because of BALANCE fundraising campaign. In all, we raised about $23,000 for BALANCE through these efforts, and Radka worked incredibly hard with me on both of them. She commented on the benefit concert being a first of its kind for BALANCE, and the campaign raising more than we had in the past. But the real bonus, she says, is that, “Those two achievements are not examples of an individual effort but rather team projects to which every single person from the team contributed, and that’s what makes [the experience] even more valuable.” I’d like to thank Radka for all of her hard work on the many details involved with creating these fundraising and friend-raising events. For sure we raised money, but even more importantly, we raised awareness and connections.

The last three comments refer to the much more recent past, the very tail end of the last fiscal year, when, on the weekend before March 16, we shifted the way we provided our services, and really pivoted to bring our team together to do things differently in the name of great service to our clients. It’s certainly been a steep learning curve, but I want to thank the team for being so flexible and resilient so that we could do an absolutely huge amount with so few people available as providers. Vanessa wrote, “” And Cristina wanted to highlight, “… the amazing support BALANCE continues to provide through Covid-19. On a moment’s notice, the BALANCE team and support staff were prepared to make the necessary changes and accommodations to continue providing Assistive Tech training remotely, create and execute groups virtually (that have reduced feelings of social isolation) and implement the Wellness team to provide weekly check-in on clients with limited supports.” Vanessa independently agreed, and also reflected the sentiments of our clients, stating, “I think one of our major achievements is starting the Wellness Team. Everyone I spoke to loves the idea and are so grateful that we are checking in and providing resources for them.” Finally, George took the words right out of my mouth and summed it up nicely, “I would have to say I am quite pleased with how the team came together and handled the pandemic by offering remote and virtual programming.”

While Vanessa and George joined us, we did have several staff leave us this past year: Naomi, Elizabeth, and then Radka. I want to thank all 3 of them for their contributions. Indeed, we are pleased that Naomi has been able to return on a part-time contract to assist us with OT services during Monika’s leave. Elizabeth is also still hovering around BALANCE, and I think she always will be. She has been volunteering with us since the very beginning of the current emergency, hosting a “Coffee Connections” current events discussion group, with hot button topics of interest specifically to our clients. I want to thank her for stepping up quickly and bringing this idea to us, and for carrying on with the groups throughout the last 3 months, twice weekly, without fail. We really appreciate the volunteer support at this crucial time. Additionally, Radka had to leave very suddenly and we were unable to give her a proper send-off. Both Elizabeth and Radka are starting grad school soon, Elizabeth in a PhD program at Western in Occupational Justice, and Radka in a Master’s program in psychology. We wish them both huge success in their studies!

Besides sending out a huge thank-you to all of our staff, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of the volunteers who assisted us with the events and programs in which our staff take so much pride. Our new volunteer program, started in 2018, has grown, and been well-managed by Anita Laurnitus, and last fiscal year with the help of Radka Gajdosova. Thank-you volunteers, for all that you have done for BALANCE and our clients.

Last, but definitely not least, I want to thank our incredibly strong and supportive Board of Directors for all of the hard work you have devoted to BALANCE as senior volunteers this past year. The board is a group of knowledgeable and committed individuals who work together extremely well and ensure that the BALANCE ship is sailing through smooth waters. A special note of thanks to our Board Chair, Michelle McQuigge, and her Executive, for guiding the board and being an excellent support for me and my work during the year. Michelle has been a wise and able governing guide, and I appreciate all the extra effort and hours she has put into ensuring she is connecting with me and in touch with what is happening “on the ground.”

We have now entered a very different year than the one I just reviewed with you. However, the key achievements highlighted by our staff are related to the backbone of this organization and the way in which we do everything, as well as our vision, mission and values. No matter the challenge, we work as a team, we work collaboratively and in partnership with others in our community, and we are innovative, creative, flexible, responsive and nimble. We listen. We search for solutions rather than dwelling on problems, and we are, indeed, unstoppable.