

]]]]LBS3E7 - The Volunteer's Volun-tell

Transcript

Naomi

Welcome to Living blind. I'm your host Naomi Hazlett, and this podcast is brought to you by BALANCE for Blind Adults, located in Toronto, Canada. This season of living blind is sponsored by Accessible Media Incorporated. Here at Living Blind, we explore the perspectives and lived experiences of people with sight loss, and delve into barriers, challenges, and real life strategies for living life to the fullest. Before we start, I wanted to give a shout out to a listener who reached out to the podcast team. Her comments are as follows: "This show is amazingly done, I could sit here for hours listening to it. It's so resourceful, it's such a place to be yourself. There's no judgment, and no matter what you say, it just feels like one big family environment." Thank you so much for your kind words, we love hearing from you guys. And if you have a comment, question or criticism regarding the show, please don't hesitate to reach out. Our contact information will be provided at the end, so stay tuned. And now, let's get down to business. For this first episode of spring, we thought we'd spring, (get it?) Some volunteering ideas on you, our faithful listeners. Why, you ask? Well, not only did we want to maybe put a bit more spring in your step, I know... again... but in Canada, mid-April brings us National Volunteer Week, this year landing on April 16, to 23rd. And we thought what better time to talk to some of our own volunteers here at BALANCE about their experiences, and encourage you to give some thought about what you might love to do, and reach out and try. So for this episode of the podcast, we've asked three volunteers with very different responsibilities to tell their stories and give us their perspectives. Or as we like to call it, the volunteers volun-tell.

Starting us off is Greg Pickios. Greg has worked for a number of years in a marketing capacity for the Internet division of various media companies. He recently went back to college to earn a diploma as a Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy Assistant, and currently works as an OTA and PTA. When he is not working, you can find him cycling in the summer, and skating in the winter. Welcome to the show, Greg.

Greg

Thank you, Naomi. Nice to be here.

Naomi

It's great to have you. And I should mention to the listeners that you know Greg and I have known each other for a little while I taught in the program that Greg was in. And I'm really happy that we've been able to keep in touch and even more thrilled that Greg has donated his time over the past little while to BALANCE for Blind Adults. So Greg, can, can you tell the listeners a little bit about what you do at BALANCE?

Greg

Sure, actually, there's a couple of things that I've gotten involved with at BALANCE. The first one is related to, well, this podcast. I was in the media division of a couple of different companies doing

marketing. And I've always been interested in internet technology. And I had the opportunity to volunteer to transcribe the podcast discussions for the audience to read later on, if they like. And so you know, I'm going to listen to myself talking now, in another week or so. And I'm going to like make sure that my editing on my transcription is spot on. And I've gotten rid of all the "um's" and "ah's" during my, the points that I speak. So that's thing number one, I've always wanted to, I've always known about the marketing side, and I've always been interested in media, but I really liked the idea of being involved in the production side. And this is a piece of the production side. You know, Jeff and you do the bulk of it, but you know, I just like got involved in that aspect. So the other thing I do with BALANCE is more of an OTA kind of a role. It relates to my recent diploma and my current occupation as an Occupational Therapist Assistant, and Physiotherapist Assistant. And this is helping a couple of BALANCE's clients who are visually impaired who need a hand with things every once in a while. And so I'll visit them each month and see what they happen to have that they would like some help with. And usually it's something tech related. I'm kind of like an IT Support Guy, for the most part, but sometimes other things such as correspondence and such that they want me to have a look at. Those are the two things that I'm doing with BALANCE.

Naomi

I think what stands out to me in terms of hearing your description is that this volunteer experience has really provided you with an opportunity to take things that you are already interested in, right? Like information technology and media, and just helping people in general, and be able to channel those skills and interests to the blind or partially sighted community.

Greg

Yeah, certainly. That's something I've thought about since I started volunteering. I haven't been a volunteer all my life, I mean, when I was doing nine-to-five, working, working in the office tower, I didn't really have a lot of time to do volunteering. And then during school, it was like nuts with time commitment there, so I certainly didn't have any time to do volunteering in that regard. But when I graduated, I'm not on the same schedule I've been on through the rest of my life, and I had the time. And when you have the time you start thinking about, well, what do I want to do with that time? Volunteering, you can do it through an altruistic sort of inspiration. You can be inspired that way, because you just want to help people, and that's great. There's also the aspect of interest, something that is of interest to you, whether it's interest, because you're interested in media, or you're interested in what other what other aspects of the volunteer opportunity that that's been presented to you. And the last thing, I think, is the idea of perhaps improving your career opportunities. Maybe you add something to your resume that shows initiative, and you can talk about that in an interview. And, and I think all three of those things sort of came into my, into my choice to volunteer with BALANCE.

Naomi

I think you've covered some really important reasons why you or maybe other people might choose to volunteer. I'm curious, Greg, I mean, I was going to ask you why BALANCE? I think part of it is because well, I mean, I'm connected with BALANCE, and you and I were connected. So I mean, just knowing about BALANCE was probably part of the reason you chose to volunteer. No pressure on my end, of course. I guess, once you got connected with BALANCE, what was it about BALANCE that kind of kept

you around? Why do you enjoy working or volunteering at this specific place, or with these specific people?

Greg

Well, it's interesting to say that you, you were indeed, the individual, the person who, who did connect me with BALANCE, but I was aware of BALANCE earlier, because it's located in, in my neighborhood. And I recognized that it was like, first, supporting people who are visually impaired. And I say, I'm familiar with that community. I, you know, I went to university way back when with, with somebody who is visually impaired, and we were roommates, and we're best friends, you know, today. And, and so I'm aware of some of the challenges that visually impaired people have at times. And, you know, if I can lend a hand, if needed, then I'm happy to do it. And so connecting with BALANCE through you was a great opportunity to, to get in to something that I was thinking about doing anyway. So it's just very timely.

Naomi

No, I agree, I think it was a really great moment. And, you know, I mean, I'm glad you were able to find a couple of spaces where you were really needed, right with the translation or sorry, transcription of the podcast and with helping some of the clients as well. And you mentioned that, you know, going into this opportunity, you had had experience and awareness, at least to some of the challenges that blind people can face in their daily lives. What has volunteering at BALANCE taught you about those challenges since you started?

Greg

Well, I see it, I see it in like in a modern context, a bit of a modern context now. You know, when I was at school, I saw it in that context of an academic context, with my friend and, and through talking to him over the years about some of the things he's doing and how he navigates life. But then seeing you know, other people in their present day environment and how, I guess what I'm saying is, I'm seeing people who are trying to, you know, book vacations on the internet or, or have to deal with bureaucracy, about their housing, or just the day to day life, things that I take for granted and it's an extra little hurdle you got to overcome to connect the right person. It's not quite so easy sometimes to get these things accomplished.

Naomi

I think that's especially true for technology because we've had other people I believe on the show that I've talked about technology like screen readers or braille displays or things like that. But it really depends on the person and how they access technology. And there can be a really huge learning curve and between updates and new apps, sometimes not everything's accessible. Can you tell us a little bit more about some of those challenges related to the tech world that you've noticed?

Greg

Sure, you're absolutely right. Like, that's, that's sort of what it is, like, our life has become so digital now. And I think that's probably a good way of putting it. Our life has become so digitally dependent now. And, boy, it's, it can be tough if you can't read the screen correctly, because the website is not built correctly, or you get updates on your computer, and you don't necessarily know what this update did or

what it changed or, or even that the update even happened. It can, it can mess up how you navigate, right? So the people that I see, they have hard drives that fail sometimes, and you got to have to go and work with a whole new hard drive, and you got to find your photos, and you got to, you know, redo some passwords and, and verify through second, you know, second factor authentication and stuff like that. And it's like a little bit, you know, it's few hoops to jump through. So, you know, you, I just, I think technology does make, it makes things easy in a lot of ways, but it is, you know, it can be complicated to navigate sometimes.

Naomi

Yeah. So, BALANCE has an "AT" apprenticeship program, because I think there's just such a demand for people to learn technology, and to get support. So I just wanted to do a little shout out there, that BALANCE does do a lot of work with teaching people tech, but yeah, sometimes there are barriers that that folks still need a little bit of assistance with. So I'm glad that your volunteer clients have you around, Greg.

Greg

Yeah, no, it's, I enjoy it, right? You were asking me before about why I'm still around, why I enjoy working with these people? And it makes it makes me feel good that they can continue on in their life. They don't need me around all the time, they got other things that they're doing, and they've got other people to help them in other areas. But once in a while they need somebody to straighten up the technology and I'm, I'm happy that can do that piece for them.

Naomi

What for you, would you say is the most meaningful part of your volunteer work?

Greg

Well, you know, the podcast is great and all, and the transcribing is, is interesting and, and whatnot. But I'd have to say it's the Occupational Therapy side, that's the more meaningful of the two volunteer opportunities that I'm doing. And that's simply because I'm helping, I'm helping people continue forward, right? I'm removing roadblocks. That's basically what it is, I'm removing roadblocks for them. So they can just continue on their merry way and continue doing what they want to do. And that, that makes me feel good. And I don't want to... I've done other volunteering in other places. And that's fine. But it was not as meaningful as this. So I ended up dropping those other volunteer opportunities. So I can continue with this, which I think is more meaningful. And yeah, it's just it makes me feel proud.

Naomi

Well you should, I mean, again, being an OT myself, I might be a little bit biased, but I know what you mean, Greg, that feeling when, I mean, OTs philosophy is about letting a person be independent. That doesn't always mean doing everything without other people, that's absolutely not the idea. But the idea of removing roadblocks, like you said, increasing somebody's ability to do things, either by themselves or without us with the support that they would like and would choose and that feeling of, you know, I helped make something easier for someone I you know, it's meaningful ourselves to help people do things that are meaningful, important, important to them. And I can totally understand why that is one of the best parts of your role.

Greg

Yeah, I'd say so. And a close second is the podcast guys, so don't feel bad. Okay, like close second. And then in this regard, is just go back to the idea of this other technology volunteer side, because of my interest in technology, we were talking about transcription software. It's like, "what the heck?", you know, when do you get the chance to talk about getting new transcription software and trying various vendors and, and looking at how the accuracy of the transcription technology is, and artificial intelligence and all that sort of thing. So like, wow, you can really geek out on that if you're into it. And, you know, that's volunteering, and that's fun.

Naomi

Hmmm. Well, in terms of parting words, Greg, is there anything you want people who are listening to the podcast and thinking about volunteering, whether with BALANCE or maybe with a similar agency? Is there anything you want them to know?

Greg

I think it comes down to, don't get freaked out about the commitment of volunteering. You know, you don't have to be a saint to go and volunteer. My thought on it is that, if it's something that aligns with your interests, then go ahead, go work with that do that. If you enjoy helping other people, go ahead and do that to the extent that you want to. And if you're looking to maybe move to a different career or move to a better position, and you think this is something of value to your that's valued in your industry, that you want to be working in, then certainly consider volunteering. But I'd say do it in an amount that you can tolerate that you want to do on your terms. Don't over commit yourself, and have parts of your volunteering experience fall apart because you don't have time, or you have to, you know, shut it down. Or you get burnt out because you're always on the go, because you're volunteering too much. So I'd say find your balance and go with it.

Naomi

I think that is some very sage advice. Thank you so much for joining us, Greg, all the best with your clients and the show. And I look forward to reading the transcript once it comes out, but also hearing you for the first time on the air.

Greg

Oh, yes, I'm certainly not looking forward to that. I think I read much better than I sound. Anyway.

Naomi

Oh, well, we'll let the listeners be the judge of that. All right. Well, thank you for coming on the show, Greg and take care.

Greg

Thank you very much. Nice, nice talking to you Naomi.

Naomi

While Greg's experience and journey has shown us that volunteering can both fulfill personal interests outside work while lining up with work skills, our next guests story shows us a very different journey, and a variety of openings that can come about as a result of an initial volunteer opportunity. Myurika Sithamparanathan emigrated to Canada when she was 10 years old, and is a recent graduate from the University of Toronto with an Honours Bachelor of Science degree. Her passion for helping people with various needs started from a young age, and she has volunteered at BALANCE for over a year. Welcome to the show, Myerika.

Myurika

Thank you so much, Naomi, for having me here.

Naomi

So can you tell us a little bit about some of the volunteer work that you're doing at BALANCE?

Myurika

Of course. So I started with balance in May 2021. I started off as a Tele-Support Volunteer Counselor, where I make like, weekly check in calls with clients and support them with anything that they need, for example, like grocery shopping, or they want to talk to get in contact with someone, then I would connect them with them. I still do it right now. So I'm still a Volunteer Counselor. Sometimes my calls last for like five minutes sometimes goes for like 45 minutes when clients feel comfortable talking for a longer period of time. So that was my initial position with BALANCE. And then I was asked to be the "Coffee Connection" facilitator. So during this position, I planned and co-facilitated group sessions for adults and older adults. So we had like, you know, games, just like random topics to talk about just like a very informal social group that promoted social connectivity. And then I was also a life skills volunteer, where I provided individualized guidance on life skills development to clients virtually via phone call, Zoom call, and even at their houses. So I worked, during this position, I worked alongside an Occupational Therapist. And then recently in January 2023, I was asked to be the Outcomes Measurement Tool Surveyor, where I contact the new intakes of BALANCE to obtain informed consent to participate in a survey that assess clients bio-psycho-social development as they take part in BALANCE services. So those are the four positions that I been part of. Yeah, it was a great experience so far.

Naomi

Well, BALANCE has been keeping you busy.

Myurika

It really has been.

Naomi

So just for those who may not be familiar with the term bio-psycho-social, I think that refers to the way that there are different things that influence our well being. So that it could include the social piece like our friends or family or social network. There's the psychology part of it, which is our mental well being. And then sometimes there's more biological factors, which would be things like your health. So would

you say that I had that I have it right, in terms of what you're looking for, for outcome measures that balance?

Myurika

Yeah, that's like, perfect! So like, during the survey, we have like, a bunch of different questions focusing on like, you know, like different daily life activities, like the survey is like, are you comfortable making appointments? Are you comfortable navigating to your house, apartment? So like, those are the type of questions that have that contains in the survey. And then we usually conduct this three times. So one, before they start the service, and then one after 10 hours, and one by the end of the service, just to see how much different BALANCE services have made. So we just wanted to see like, if the answer that they provided in the pre-service differs from the end of the survey.

Naomi

That's so interesting! I think that's, it's sometimes it's hard to measure the impact of the services a non-profit organization provides to its clients. Have you noticed anything as you're tracking the results that you can talk about?

Myurika

Um, so this position was very recent. So I just started in January. So so far, I only worked on pre-service, no one really finished their 10 hours yet to conduct the mid service survey yet. So I haven't really noticed anything, but like from when I was doing the pre-survey, like clients, I mentioned that they are so like, determined to see the changes that the BALANCE services will provide by the end of the third survey. So like that one of the clients recently mentioned that she was she's not able to text people because she's fully blind. So she mentioned that, like she was reaching out to someone from BALANCE, and then that she's going to be starting to work on that with him. And she was very excited for that. So I'm, I'm so eager to see how, how their survey looks by the end and to see if there's any difference with the survey. And the measurement.

Naomi

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it too! Hopefully, we can keep in touch about it. That being said, even though we may not have results from the outcome survey (I know that something that you're doing more recently), you've had some other positions with BALANCE where you've had one-on-one firsthand experience with clients. So can you tell us a little bit about what's come up during those sessions with clients, what are things that you've experienced that have kind of taught you a little bit more about the work that BALANCE does?

Myurika

Yeah. Yeah, like some of my clients, especially for my "Wellness, Tele-Support Wellness", when I was a volunteer counselor, like they are very, very open, and I can see that they trust me a lot in the way that they told me about their personal life. Every time that I have conversations with my clients, they make me feel like they really trust me a lot. Because sometimes they tell me about some of the very personal things that are not really related to the services they provide. But I can tell that they trust me a lot to share some of their personal experience. And they mentioned how talking to me makes their day easier. And it's less stressful for that. So like, you know, sometimes I have clients, crying to me and

stuff, but then by the end of the call, they're all happy that we had this conversation, which is what I love about volunteering for BALANCE. It's just that, it's the satisfaction that I get when I when I have to go to bed, just going to bed every day, knowing that you made someone happy, or their life a little less stressful is a really good thing. And I'm very, very happy that I'm able to do this for almost almost two years at BALANCE.

Naomi

Hmm. I remember when the tele-support or counseling programs started up. From my understanding, it began as a response to the isolation a lot of people in the blind community were feeling because of the pandemic. Is that something that people you talk to spoke about?

Myurika

Yeah, so most of my clients that are seniors, they actually live alone. And, ah, you know, they, some of them, they don't like listening to radio or watching TV. Or, you know, like listening to audio books or anything like that. So they had like, no social life technically, right. So, like I had clients mention, like, "oh, you're the only one that calls me today", you know. So those made me feel like I'm making a big impact... small, but very important impact, you know. Especially during the pandemic, when I heard, like, so many sad stories about like, people, you know, making the wrong decision, because of isolation. And I'm glad that I was able to, you know, just simply have like, literally five minute conversations by them, just to make sure that they're not isolated, they're getting everything they can, like, you know, for example, groceries right at their doorstep. Those are some of the things that my clients very, really appreciated. So I'm glad that Volunteer Aid Counselor was the first position I got at BALANCE and make, I was able to make an impact on people's lives, especially during the pandemic.

Naomi

It sounds like, you know, people really appreciated or really benefited from things like you said, getting groceries delivered, but really, it was something that that may seem small to us, like a conversation can make a really big impact in somebody's life.

Myurika

Right? Yeah, totally.

Naomi

And then you said, you also taught life skills. Is that right?

Myurika

Yeah, so that was only for like, a couple of months. So during that position, like I would, mostly my visits were all in person. So I had to go in person, I had a client who, who made like scarves, hats, she knitted, she knitted those things. So she wanted to promote her items online. But she wasn't able to do that alone, she needed someone to help her like take photos, like, you know, put the hat on the mannequin, and take proper photos to upload it on the website. So I would help her like, you know, tell her like, these are like some of the tips that you can use to actually take pictures on her own. And she actually from our first visit to last visit, she was nearly close to doing everything on her own without any of my support. So those are the type of work that I do as a Life Skills Volunteer.

Naomi

That's amazing. And I think you also mentioned that you were working under an OT supervision, I know that as an OT, yeah, we often help people with life skills. So can you tell me a little bit more about that experience as well?

Myurika

Yeah, so it was, so I wanted to, like I'd meet with my OT, when I was volunteering for this position. So like, you know, we would just have like conversations about, you know, mostly it was about clients, but we would also talk about just like, the role of Occupational Therapists, and like, the impact that they make in their life, because clearly the, the client that I helped doing, taking photos of her products, we were able to see a huge difference, just from like, literally three visits, right, in three weeks, three visits, right. So we were able to see how much, you know, the OT was able to you know, just adapt and change how a person functions, you know, like, just on their own. Before, like, I would have to like hold her hand, when I would tell her "oh, you have to click on this button to take pictures, you have to move the mannequin." But now like she's telling me she's like, "the mannequin is right there. You know, I know how to take pictures and everything." So like, you know, it's like, it's great to see these. These impacts that OT's have on people's lives.

Naomi

Yeah, throughout OT is a huge role. And I think that, you know, they work with people who've had an injury, but then also when it comes to living with a disability, it may not be you know, necessarily going back to the way things were it might just be changing things, making some little changes in the way that you're doing things right now, like you said, just to make everyday activities easier.

Myurika

Yeah.

Naomi

Yeah. So I know you talked a little bit about why this volunteer role is so important to you, just knowing at the end of the day that you're making a difference in people's lives. What got you interested in volunteering for BALANCE in the first place?

Myurika

So my sister actually she told me about BALANCE. She used to volunteer for BALANCE. And you know, one day we were just like catching up with you know, life and she she just told me about this community organization that she was part of. And that's how I first ever heard about BALANCE. And when she was telling me, she told me about the pros of being part of BALANCE, the main one being, like I said, creating a positive impact on client's lives. And that was the initial spark for me, because growing up in a war torn country, I witnessed how my father was a helping hand to hundreds and thousands of displaced people. So especially during the Civil War, families lost their loved ones, and right in front of their eyes, and many were like, separated from their loved ones as well. So during this time, like my dad, he worked as a field staff supporting people by providing basic needs, such as like, you know, food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities, but he also provided mental health support,

which in my opinion, is oftentimes overlooked. And I actually remember him coming back home. And he would talk about how he spent most of his day talking to the survivors and just simply, you know, listening to them, share all about their hardship. And by offering emotional support and supporting them with basic needs, he was able to take some stress, stress off their shoulders during one of their most toughest times of their lives. And this is what made me want to help people, whether it be socially, education wise, financially, or like mental health. I wanted to support people in various settings. And when my sister was telling me about BALANCE, I believed that BALANCE would give me the right opportunity to make small, but like I said, important changes in client's lives.

Naomi

Wow, I mean, that is a really incredible story, and I think it just speaks to how, you know, I wish that no one would have to go through that kind of hardship in life. But I think when people experience that hardship, and turn around and give, I think it just is so meaningful. And I'm very happy to hear that you took your father's story and you thought, "yes, I want to do that myself." Now that we're in Canada.

Myurika

Exactly. Yeah.

Naomi

And where are you from originally before you came to Canada?

Myurika

So I was from Sri Lanka. So it's like a little island close to India. That's where I was born. And I came here when I was 10 years old. It's been 13 years.

Naomi

Wow. Well, Myurika, I feel like I have a much better sense of the kind of work that you do at BALANCE. For people who may be listening to the show and thinking, "I want to get involved, whether it's at BALANCE or another agency", what advice do you have for people who are thinking about volunteering in a roll like one of the ones that you've had?

Myurika

Yeah, so you know, like, just get started with like, you know, we have uh BALANCE has so many great opportunities, like the ones I have. So just get started, get connected with one of our supervisors at BALANCE you can literally it's very flexible. So you can have your like, right now I'm a full time worker, but I'm still maintaining, calling my clients and doing the other two positions that were assigned. So it's very flexible. And like I said, you would have a lot of benefits such as satisfaction, you know, just the idea that you've had a positive impact on someone's life is a big deal. So, you know, you have the satisfaction and happiness out of that. And you also make like great connections at BALANCE. I met some wonderful people from BALANCE. And as a recent graduate, connections are very, very important. And I wouldn't hesitate to say that people I've met at BALANCE are one of the reasons for my success in career as well as education. So you should definitely get started. At BALANCE, you also maintain I must talk about the skill. So that's also a huge advantage. I learned and improved on a lot of

skills, which will for sure help me in the future academically and as career wise. So if you're looking to get involved in the community, I strongly believe that BALANCE is the first step.

Naomi

Amazing, it's there really are so many ways that volunteering can help, you know, whether it's you but also just as equally the people in the community. So I'm glad! That's great advice. Thank you. And where can people get in touch with you if they want to learn more about you and your work?

Myurika

Um, so people can find me through LinkedIn. So it's my first name and my last name. So Myurika, MYURIKA last name SIPHAMPARANATHAN. You can also email me at myrica MYURIKAS@gmail.com.

Naomi

Well, I wish you all the best, Myurika, on your volunteer role with BALANCE, and thank you so much for coming on the show today.

Myurika

Thank you so much for your time Naomi, and for having me here. Thank you so much!

Naomi

And now a message from our sponsor. Discover AMI's collection of podcasts, created by, and for, the blind and partially sighted community. Visit AMI.ca to learn more. AMI entertains, informs and empowers. And now back to the podcast. Our last guest had a different reason to step forward and provide his skills, knowledge and experience to the organization not once, but twice. Introducing, Martin Courcelles. Martin brings over 15 years of experience in the realm of screen reading technology, and currently works at CIBC on the Accessibility team as a User Experience Accessibility Consultant. As a person with lived experience having to use access technology every day, Martin explains how to improve web properties and smartphone apps to ensure accessibility for all. He is a subject matter expert at using JAWS, NVDA and Narrator on the PC, and voiceover and talkback on smartphones. In his downtime, Martin enjoys running, hiking, tandem cycling, and other outdoor activities. Welcome to the show, Martin.

Martin

Hi, thank you for having me. Serving sounds like I'm in jail or something, but it's actually not that at all.

Naomi

Well, maybe we maybe we'll start there. So what, what do you do on the Board of Directors? If it's not, it's not a jail sentence?

Martin

Well, right now, I'm simply a member at large. But I was pulled in for a second time because I was told that I was a very techy person. And they needed that on to the on the board. So I figured why not? And

yeah, so I've been here for probably a year and a half now already. Time sure flies when you're having fun.

Naomi

So when you say member at large, it means you don't necessarily have an official role, but you are still participating in all the ways that a member of a Board of Directors would.

Martin

That is correct, yes, I do have you know, voting capabilities. And I can participate. And people tell me to be quiet sometimes because I talk too much. But no, we have a great time.

Naomi

So in terms of what a Board of Directors does, just thinking about listeners who may have not heard of that term before, why does a nonprofit organization like BALANCE have a Board of Directors in the first place?

Martin

So essentially, it's it's a place where past BALANCE participants or members of the public can sort of put in input in the where they would like BALANCE to go. Like, you know, what we could do better, or what we could improve or what we could continue doing. So essentially, we help the CEO to make those decisions and help direct that sort of thinking. There's lots of brainstorming, and just a lot of sharing of ideas and stuff like that. So it's a fun exercise for me anyways, because it's something completely different from what I do for my day to day.

Naomi

And can I ask you what that is?

Martin

Yeah, sure. I work within the accessibility field. I'm currently at CIBC, the financial organization. And so I, I work on a team of about 15 people right now. And I do testing for web pages, apps, for mobile devices, and anything else that they throw at me. So it's, again, it's a bit geeky, but it's a lot of fun for me.

Naomi

Well, sometimes geeks rule the world and you mentioned because you mentioned that the board has put your skills to use.

Martin

Yeah, they have a few times. I mean, I always I always try to find better ways to do things more accessible ways. So for example, we had a questionnaire to be sent to the whole board and the old way is to send a Word document and then the blind people including me screw up the formatting because well, you know, Word was not made to do forms. So what I suggest usually is to do a Microsoft Form or a Google Forms. And those are fully accessible if you do it the right way. So just little

things like that to make things easier and quicker and just easier for everyone. And that's the big thing for me is I want everyone to have the same experience.

Naomi

For sure. I guess I'm curious too, because, you know, we're a few years out from the pandemic, does the Board of Directors still meet virtually? Or do they meet in person these days?

Martin

You know what, that's the great part. I've always, always even the last time I was on the board, I always said, I want to do virtual because I live far out in Scarborough and to go down to the office and stuff like it's fine. But some people have a five minute commute home, I have an hour. So sometimes I just want to get home before, you know, 10. And having the capability of going virtual, it's enabled enabled us to have meetings at early as early as four o'clock in the afternoon. So you spend an hour or two on virtually, and then you're on your way and don't have to commute or anything, so yeah, I'm a big proponent of that sort of thing. So I'm quite happy about that. I'm sure we're gonna meet again, in person. And you know, I sort of do miss that. But at the same same time, if we can have a mix, I think that's great. And that's one of the things that BALANCE has done during the COVID pandemic is reach out to a lot more people, not only in Ontario, but farther abroad, like other provinces and stuff like that, because I mean, anybody can dial in, right, so any of the activities that we had for the clients, you know, some some people would ask, well, can we participate too, and we kept it as open as possible. So it was kind of neat to see that other other people out of Canada were able to participate, even though they lived far away. So I think that's really cool.

Naomi

Yeah, I mean, a story for another day, but maybe I'll share on the podcast sometime, when I had folks coming in to my groups from Saskatchewan when I worked.

Martin

Yeah, that's so cool.

Naomi

For sure. So I know, we're kind of talking about connecting virtually with BALANCE, but generally speaking, like what brought you to BALANCE in the first place?

Martin

Well, I've been a BALANCE participant for the longest time, I moved into Toronto back in '99. And I needed mobility services. I approached other organizations, and it was all "well, we'll see if we can maybe do it in six weeks to two months." And for me, I needed services as quickly as possible, because I had employment and I needed to figure out the subway system. I needed to figure out like how to get to work in this and all that sort of thing. So I approached BALANCE, and I got service within probably the same week that I called. So I thought that was amazing. And what BALANCE gave me was the the basics of moving around in Toronto, and ever since then it's been, you know, skills, of course, that I've been broadening on my own. But back then, you know, being in the big city, it was a bit difficult because I had never used a subway before. And Torontonians seem to like stand really close to

the track edge. And I was really paranoid about that. So I'm a bit better I can, I still don't go too close, because I'm still scared. But you know, it was just getting that confidence is what I needed and BALANCE was able to provide that to me within a good amount of time. So.

Naomi

yeah, that's something I've always appreciated about BALANCE is that there's a lot of organizations where you'd be in a waitlist for quite a long time. But they're, they're very responsive to clients. They they're small but mighty team.

Martin

Yep, very nimble. And maybe that's, you know, one of the reasons that they do so well is because, or that we do so well, I guess. Because the team is that small and just that... what's the word? I was going to use nimble, but I already use that. So dynamic, maybe? Flexible. But yeah, I mean, they always find a way of providing a service for someone that needs it as quickly as possible.

Naomi

No, that makes sense. I'm glad you were able to connect with balance back in '99 and clearly you liked it enough to stick around. What is it about volunteering that is meaningful for you these days?

Martin

Yeah, that was one of the questions I saw you were going to ask me and I still don't really have an answer. I mean, I want to give back to the community. And I think this is one way of doing that. And I know that this service is important to a lot of people. And that's why I feel that being on the board, it gives me a chance to, to participate within that whole process, right. So I'm able to give ideas or vote on projects and stuff like that. So for me, you know, not only does it benefit other people, but it might benefit me one day when I need BALANCE services again. So I mean, I'm very honored to be on the board.

Naomi

I think something that has stood out to me in terms of talking to all three volunteers, is that volunteering can take so many different forms. We've heard stories of people, working one on one with clients, we've heard stories of people working behind the scenes with the podcast with transcribing, and being on the Board of Directors is not necessarily something that people would be aware of, you know, in terms of BALANCE's everyday operations. It is kind of more behind the scenes, but leadership is important. I don't know, if you want to speak more to that piece around, you know, what does being a leader and taking this role in terms of maybe maybe you're not teaching life skills, like some of our volunteers, but being able to be at the table when BALANCE is making decisions about what direction to go? Like, can you speak more to to that experience that you've had?

Martin

Well, it's interesting, because I mean, you always think as well, for me anyways, I always thought, well, I didn't even know if I had particular skills that might benefit, you know, a BALANCE board. And having been approached twice now, I guess, I do have some that has some some skill set to benefit the whole board. So that's great. And that's something to think about as well, because we're always recruiting

new people to come onto the board. Because we, you know, we don't want to stagnate, we don't want to have the same people all the time. So if you do think that you do have particular skills that you could share with the board, you can always contact BALANCE. And there's a process that you have to go through, it's not arduous, it's just you know, but I think it's it's important that you know, even though you're a BALANCE participant, don't think that you don't have the skills, because you, you most likely have something that you can bring to the table. And that's mainly what the board is all about... is to bring skills and experience as well. Because one of the things that we want to make sure is that there's representation of blind people on the board. Otherwise, you know, it's not really worth having a board if if we don't have those people like, like us on the board represented, right. So yeah, so I mean, that's, that's pretty much it.

Naomi

No, I think that you made a good point. And I think that's important to mention, you talked a little bit about your tech skills, or maybe your experience as a client of BALANCE, but I feel like we missed the big one, which is, you know, "nothing about us, without us." The whole point of having folks with lived experience on the board is that the right people can be at the table informing the organization about how best to I don't want to say serve, because we're not talking about jail... no... to help its clients.

Martin

That's my favorite quote, nothing... Can you repeat it again, because forgot - nothing without us or nothing with us?

Naomi

Nothing about us, without us.

Martin

There's nothing about us without us. It's my favorite quote, and I keep forgetting it. But what I love about it is that it gives the idea of, you know, how can we help you? Or how can we help? So, one of the things I don't like is when someone comes up to me and says, I know what you want, and it's like, well, how would you know what I want if you haven't talked to me, or if you haven't asked me any questions. One of the big things when I when I join a new organization is you know, there's always a fire plan. The fire plan when you're a person with a disability is like, "okay, you're gonna sit here and we're gonna come and collect you when we have the time." It's like, "no, if there's a fire, I will go with everybody else. I have a guide dog. I can follow my guide dog right?" But most organizations will not ask you "what what would work best for you." They just say "well, this is what you do and we're going to collect you, and you're going to have to wait." And I've had many, many discussions about such things. And my fire plan has always had to be modified because someone else thought that was the best thing for me. And for me, it's, you know, I will follow other people, and I'm fine. So, but yeah, so you know that that, quote is very dear to me and dear to my heart. And I truly believe that you need to have people with disabilities involved within organizations such as this so that it makes the best product possible. So what's really nice about the board is that you get to learn new things that you may have never touched on before. So that's for me, I'm always wanting to learn new things, so it's, it's kind of fun to be able to do all this stuff and be able to do it in a safe and, you know, friendly atmosphere. And that's what BALANCE board is all about.

Naomi

Yeah, no, I feel like I have a much better picture of, of a part of BALANCE I've never experienced myself. But thanks so much for for telling us about your role, and for volunteering and BALANCE. If people want to learn more about you or your work, how can they get in touch?

Martin

Well, I'm on LinkedIn. And where else, I'm on Twitter, although not as much. Facebook, of course. And just recently Mastodon, and then if you want to contact me directly, I think my contact information is actually on the BALANCE page. BALANCE Board page.

Naomi

Oh, of course. Yeah, that makes sense. Well, thanks again, Martin. I wish you all the best and it sounds like you... although you're on the Board of Directors, it sounds like you certainly won't be bored anytime soon.

Martin

Not anytime soon. Well, thank you so much for the opportunity it was lots of fun.

Naomi

Martin's story demonstrates that often people volunteer because they want to give back to causes, agencies, communities, or institutions that have helped them in some way. All three of our guests on today's episode have demonstrated the wide range of activities undertaken by volunteers in nonprofit organizations, as well as the variety of different motivations that bring people to volunteer their time. Many organizations like ours had to reduce or eliminate volunteer interaction with clients during the worst of the pandemic. This has meant that remote roles like Myurika's tele-support work, Greg's podcast transcription assistance, and Martin's work on the Board of Directors became crucial for so many nonprofit agencies. Statistics Canada reports that pre-pandemic for their last survey in 2018, eight in 10 Canadians did volunteer work. And in that year, the number of hours volunteered was equal to 2.5 million full time jobs. The next report is due out this year, and I'm sure that we will see these numbers have gone up. With so many impacted in different ways by the pandemic and making an educated guess that the need for volunteers has increased. So what's your reason for volunteering? Maybe you love the arts like theater or galleries. Maybe you love to read, or are a good listener. You might have a hobby you might want to share with others, or you need and want work experience. If you'd like to get out more, be more social, give back, work as part of a team like a board, or simply help out, you can usually call the organization you're interested in, or click their volunteer button on their website homepage. Once again, I hope you've enjoyed my conversations with Greg, Martin, and Myurika on this very important topic, and we thank them for their time. Also, thank you to our Producer Jeffrey Rainey, our Executive Producer Deborah Gold, and the entire team at BALANCE including all the wonderful volunteers for their support of the community they serve. Get in touch with the podcast on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter by searching BALANCE for Blind Adults, and chat with the other listeners in the Living Blind Listeners Facebook Group. You can also email us at LivingBlindPodcast@BalanceFBA.org. For more information about BALANCE for blind adults in our programs and services, or to access the show notes and transcription of this episode, please visit us at

www.BalanceFBA.org. I'm Naomi Hazlett, and this has been Living Blind the Volunteers Volun-tell. Thanks for listening.

Balance For Blind Adults

At BALANCE for Blind Adults, we appreciate everyone who chooses to support our small yet mighty organization. In honor of National Volunteer Week, which takes place April 16 through 22nd, we want to thank those currently volunteering and encourage anyone wanting to volunteer to please reach out through our website, www.BalanceFBA.org. We've got a variety of opportunities for all skill levels and time commitments. While financial donations are always welcome and crucial to our vision of providing an open world for persons who are blind or living with sight loss, your gift of time is also incredibly valuable and deeply appreciated!