



Improving Communications For People With Disabilities **By Gunela Astbrink**

Rotary eClub One has partnered with Rotary Club of Canberra East (District 9710, Australia) to support a feasibility study for an advocate training program in improving communications and information technology for people with disabilities. Funding is now needed to put the program into action.

Imagine not being able to pick up a phone to make a call, or to hear your child on the end of a phone line or to be able to see the web pages on the Internet. This is what happens every day to many people who have a physical disability, a hearing impairment or are blind. Technology has provided many solutions so that a person with a severe physical disability can use switches and memory keys to dial numbers, a Deaf person can use video or text calling and a blind person can have speech reading software installed on their computer for navigating the Internet.

I have worked with people with disabilities for the past 20 years mainly in information technology research and policy. This work means getting to know people who are blind, have low vision, are hearing impaired or Deaf, have a speech impairment or a physical disability. I recognise some issues that especially people with physical impairment face as I had osteomyelitis (bone marrow disease) as a child which meant being in plaster up to my waist for 18 months. There were complications leading to another operation and a weakening of the knee. A fracture when I was 17 didn't help either. And just this year, I've had another complicated fracture just above the knee!

Despite this, I have travelled the world and become passionate about improving access to telecommunications and IT for people with disabilities both in Australia and internationally. I am National Coordinator in Australia for TEDICORE (Telecommunications and Disability Consumer Representation). This means making industry, government and regulators aware of the needs of people with disabilities.

But it requires people with disabilities from different organisations to show the need for improvements in the products and services that many of us take for granted. It might be as simple as having a mobile phone with large enough keys and font size on the screen or as technical as introducing Video over IP and relay services in a way that Deaf people can use sign language to communicate with each other and the wider community.

Australia has led the way in consumer representation. Small disability advocacy groups divide their attention to the many areas of improvement required in the community. Training a representative in the complex world of technical, legislative and regulatory ICT issues can be a daunting and expensive task. This is needed for disability representatives of advocacy organisations to effectively contribute on industry and regulatory consultative committees and make their points heard when talking to key stakeholders and writing submissions.

Rotary eClub One and Rotary Club of Canberra East (District 9710, Australia) have recognised this need and funded a feasibility study into a training and mentoring program. I have written a report, with a training facilitator, outlining an innovative online and face-to-face training program. We have called it the ICT Access Advocates Development Program. This will not be a static training product but an ongoing professional development process.



Make-Up Program

The use of online and DVD delivery by experts on topics such as

- bridging the digital divide
- technology development and best practice access
- setting the framework for the market

means that selected people can learn in their own time and interact on an online discussion forum. This will be supplemented by weekend workshops on "being heard and making a difference". Peer support groups will help with mentoring on an ongoing basis.

This pilot program will be evaluated and adjusted according to feedback from participants. It is intended that the program will be started in Australia and then it can be adapted for use in other countries.

The learning material has to be developed, the website site and discussion forum designed and implemented and the weekend workshops organised. All this will be done by a Program Manager and overseen by a Steering Committee. A Management Group will ensure ongoing evaluation. I will be providing advice throughout the project.

To achieve all this, initial funding of A\$178,000 (US\$153,000) is needed. After the program has been assessed, we anticipate annual costs for the delivery of the program of around A\$115,000 (US\$99,000). Approaches for financial support are being made to industry as well as to the Australian Government.

Assistance in this fund-raising process from Rotarians will be most welcome.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gunela Astbrink is the National Coordinator of TEDICORE (Telecommunications and Disability Consumer Representation), a not-for-profit organization that strives for better access to and equity in telecommunications for people with a disability in Australia. It works with government, industry and regulators to advocate for better products and services. www.tedicore.org.au