

**SOCIAL DISABILITY STUDIES –**  
**SOWK 2007 (SW24A) 2006**

**INDIVIDUAL PROJECT**

Identify someone with a disability who has made a note-worthy contribution to Trinidad and Tobago. Identify the factors which contribute to the success of the individual.

**JOSEPH “LINGO” LA PLACELIERE**

*Written by Mark Lawrence*

*Student of the Social Disability Studies Class, SOWK 2007 (SW24A)*

*The University of the West Indies*

*St. Augustine Campus*

*Trinidad and Tobago*

**April 4th 2006**

## PROFILE

Trinidad born Joseph La Placeliere, also known as the "Mighty Lingo"; heavily touted extempo calypsonian is presently in his mid thirties. La Placeliere was blind from birth due to his mother having a bout of Rubella which is a viral infection also known as German measles.

He attended the Trinidad & Tobago School for Blind Children from 1975 to 1985 and was then integrated into St. Joseph College from 1985 to 1989. He experienced challenges getting his books on time and was made to sit in a class and listen rather than participating fully.

According to La Placeliere, "my childhood was okay, it was very normal from my perspective. With the family I was treated just like everyone else, I ran about and played like anyone else. Most of my family live close by, we were close knit so that was a support. I remember always playing cricket with all the other children. This wasn't blind cricket but normal cricket just like the other children I grew up with. I loved to climb trees and do all the usual "boy days" things."

"My parents were told that I'd die by age twenty. I was told and I believed it. But when I didn't die I realized that the world would simply attempt to limit me and I should not live by those limitations." La Placeliere used this to fuel his future endeavors. He has sought to empower himself in different ways in order to become as independent as he could be. In describing his personality change from then to now he indicated; "Well, I have taken a different approach. My outlook is different now. I have faced discrimination in all forms and fashions. I have been discriminated against based on my blindness, my skin colour and my educational achievement among other factors. The banks don't want to give me money; taxis don't want to pick me up so I have taken a boldfaced approach. Now I say that if you're trying to muzzle me I move on, if you try to make me handicapped I'll let

you know that your help is optional and not necessary. People who try to help me cross the street or do other things sometimes, get hostile and when they do I let them know that I can make it on my own."

This empowerment is reflected in La Placeliere's daily activities. He describes his day as, "normal like anyone else's." La Placeliere is employed in the workshop of the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TTABVI), the biggest of three organizations that care for the blind and partially sighted in Trinidad where every hundredth inhabitant is visually impaired. He works specifically at the basketry of the TTABVI where he and his colleagues engage in the weaving of baskets and bags out of cane, repairing rattan and upholstered furniture.

"My day is as normal as everybody else's. I wake up and go to work at eight O' clock. I leave work by about four in the evening and travel home. My evening activity includes spending time on the internet and other normal activities," said the confident La Placeliere.

He uses a speech program which allows him to identify websites, links and read out pages of interest such as newspaper articles, jokes, sport scores and e-mails. He communicates with persons from all over the world via e-mail in addition to doing research on the Internet.

With regard to the pursuit of his endeavors La Placeliere pointed out that he realized that one should never lose sight of one's dreams regardless of who or what tried to discourage you. Among La Placeliere's aspirations is to one day get married, own his own home and perform all over the world.

He had always had a penchant for music as he learned to play the guitar at an early age. He would poke friendly jokes at some of his friends who would reply in a similar manner and this led him to his "extempo roots". Based on this involvement he was always encouraged by friends and family to become involved in calypso on a national level. Over the past four years, the Mighty Lingo pursued a career as a calypso singer and

excelled. His talent in the extempo field began to show at his debut in 1999 when he entered the AnyHowers Extempo competition and placed third. The following year he competed again and ranked even higher: placing second in a field of eight. In 2001 Joseph performed at the Yangatang calypso tent and made the finals that same year placing third in the Finals but was clearly the people's choice. He moved to the Calypso Spectacular tent in 2005 and in 2006, he performed in the Icons Calypso Tent. La Placeliere has become one the most talked about extempo calypsonians in Trinidad and Tobago. He produced his own CD this year (2006) and is expected to soon have his own studio to record himself and others.

### **FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO LA PLACELIERE'S SUCCESS**

It would be remiss not to acknowledge that the support systems offered to La Placeliere were significant contributing factors to his eventual success. La Placeliere pointed out that he was supported by his family and integrated into their activities in whatever way from birth. Presently, he still gets a great deal of assistance from his brother with whom he lives. This support has allowed him to feel empowered and to develop a significant level of confidence and independence to face challenges and overcome them. This is reflected in the position which he adopted when he realized that people sought to limit him based on his disability – “when I didn't die (at age 20), I realized that the world would simply attempt to limit me and I should not live by those limitations”.

Beyond this, his attempt to set up a studio could easily have been hindered by the testimony of another blind person who had failed in his attempt. However his perseverance and determination did not facilitate this discouragement.

The Trinidad & Tobago School for Blind Children also provided support at a pivotal time in La Placeliere's life (Santrock, 2004). At present his involvement in the TTABVI offers him needed socialization. This is reflected in La Placeliere's statement regarding the TTABVI as, "spending productive time with good company."

His involvement in calypso is actually based on the encouragement of these support groups. This was seen in the urges of his family members and peers at the TTABVI which provided an opportunity to express his talent in the calypso competition.

He is also a coordinator of the national blind-cricket tournaments which offers an outlet for blind persons to pursue their sporting and physical fitness interests. This can possibly lead to increased awareness of the public of persons with disabilities and their capabilities.

### **LESSONS LEARNT**

While preparing this assignment it became clear that the disabled /differently abled is not a powerless group. What also became evident is that even when someone with a disability grows in his or her level of independence there is a need for support systems; human, legislative and technological.

Also the position of a disabled person, even if support is given, should not be taken as pitiful. Excessive sympathy and treatment of the disabled as incapable of making their own decisions or acting independently can be destructive. The interviewee made this clear when he said that he readily indicates to persons who are overly dictatorial in their assistance that he is capable of functioning on his own.

It is also clear that the awareness of the public to the plight of the disabled is necessary for their full participation in the society.

## **REFERENCES**

Chamberlin, J. A working definition of empowerment Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 20, 43-46, c1997

Neufeldt, Aldred H. and Albright, Alison L. Disability and Self-directed Employment Captus University Publications, c1998

Poppo, P. R. and Leighninger, L. The Policy Based Profession: An Introduction to Social Welfare Policy Allyn and Bacon, c 1998

Santrock, J. W. Life-span Development McGraw-Hill Higher Education, c2004