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.

ANCIL TORRES

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April 4th 2006
BACKGROUND OF THE INDIVIDUAL

At 42 years of age Mr. Ancil Torres is a force to be reckoned with. Diagnosed as suffering with Marfan's Syndrome, (a genetic tissue disorder—likely inherited from his father who also suffered with the defect—which resulted in the dislocation of the lenses in his eyes and has left him with about 20 per cent vision). Instead of becoming incapacitated by his disability he turned it around and has become one of the foremost activists for persons with disabilities.

At age five (1969), Ancil Torres’ parents sent him to the School for the Blind located in Santa Cruz. In those days the School for the Blind, which was government-assisted, functioned as a boarding school for visually-impaired students. It was the first time in his life that Torres was going to be separated from his parents and it was a very painful experience for him. Gradually, Mr. Torres adapted to his new environment in which he and the other children were not only educated, but were also trained to become as independent as possible.

He learned how to read and write Braille; how to socialise and make friends; and how to do some household chores, like making his own bed. But, for Torres, the thing he enjoyed the most at the School for the Blind was learning how to swim, using the school's outdoor pool which formed part of its recreational facilities. Mr. Torres said that the swimming distracted students from their reality. Many happy moments were spent there. He maintained that as a blind person you want to get something to distract you from your reality and that the pool was an excellent distraction.

Ancil Torres left the School for the Blind in 1981 and with a scholarship from Royal Bank in 1982 he went to the United States of America to pursue a degree in Computer Information Systems. Since then he has been employed in his field of speciality in assistive technology, that is, technology that allows the disabled to access the computer. He couples a career in training with one in sales, and since 1999, he has added public service to his resume.
In 1997 Mr. Torres suffered a heart attack and the following year his father died of similar complications. His father, who was also blind, was an outspoken leader and an advocate for the advancement and social development of the blind. He contends that such experiences focus the mind and make an individual start looking for meaning in life. He therefore started to look at the plight of blind people in Trinidad and Tobago. He saw that all the people had available to them was basket weaving at the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (formerly called the Blind Welfare Association).

In an attempt therefore to broaden the lives of persons with disabilities here in Trinidad and Tobago and in honour of his father, the W. R. Torres Foundation for the Blind became a reality. The Foundation is of the view that when a blind person has been provided with the proper tools, education, equal access, and a chance to prove himself, only then will he truly have the ability to make himself a productive successful member of society. In 2004, the Foundation was the recipient of the Hummingbird Medal (Gold) for community service.

At 42 years of age he has conquered the world with his technological skills and has travelled to almost every Caribbean island and also to countries as far as Kenya. Mr. Torres is a Technology Specialist for Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind. He has been featured in all the newspapers in Trinidad and Tobago, in newspapers in Barbados and in the Washington Times.

He is an advocate for person with disabilities being able to do anything they put their minds to. As an assistive technology specialist he helps his clients by providing trust, consistency and perseverance and by taking on the role of mentor. This enables him to form relationships with his clients and that has proven to be valuable when learning seemed too difficult to achieve. His personal encouragement inspires his clients to stick with his training, and his teaching is focused on imparting knowledge in a way that his clients could receive and comprehend.
Mr. Torres has also brought inspiration as a role model. Legally blind, he has proven firsthand how a blind person can work with technology. This provides a constant reminder to his clients that working in the field of technology, is an achievable goal. Mr. Torres believes that, "now that the Foundation provides essential technology training and educational support services, blind people feel empowered and confident, and are returning to the classroom to develop skills to start building new careers”.

Although he resides and works in the United States of America his heart belongs to Trinidad and Tobago and he always considers here his home. He said, "I lived in the United States and was lucky to benefit from access to assistive technology and the things they made possible for me. I felt that I had to come to Trinidad essentially and spread the gospel about it”. He believes though, that individuals in Trinidad and Tobago have a long way to go in accepting disabled individuals in the society. But he agrees that the country has taken significant strides in the accommodation of persons with disabilities.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As the President of the Foundation, Mr. Ancil Torres has been successful in developing a number of programmes and technological services for the visually impaired in Trinidad which include:

- The Blind Independence Through Technology (BITT) program that has trained over sixty (60) blind/visually impaired individuals in basic computer literacy to date.
- The Innovative Employment Solutions (IES) program which creates job opportunities and internships for people who are blind.
- Introduction of the first reading and shopping service for the blind through the Community Volunteer Network (CVN) program. The service is quite popular among blind students and employed adults who use the volunteers to read their textbooks, correspondences, and newspapers as well as for shopping assistance at the mall or grocery.
- The establishment of the first scholarship fund for blind citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.
- Installation of a state-of-the-art assistive technology solutions at NALIS to provide people who are blind, low vision, deaf, and mobility impaired with access to the library's high-tech network information system. One of the more significant things about the library project is that Trinidad is now setting an example for countries in Latin American, Suriname and Barbados who are interested in modifying their library services. Even the well-known computer giant, Hewlett Packard, has contacted the Torres Foundation about possible future projects.
- Establishment of the first assistive technology subsidy program for people who are blind in Trinidad and Tobago. Blind individuals can receive as much as US$695 in subsidies for the purchase of technology that enable them to use the computer.
- Donation of more than twelve (12) computer systems to blind students, employed, adults and individuals who have achieved excellence.

Mr. Torres is on an endless quest to make sure that the visually impaired persons in Trinidad and Tobago and for that matter all persons with disabilities have the chance that he did to succeed. This man has truly overcome the odds that seem to be so firm against persons with disabilities by showing the world that he could do it.

With the help of people and organisations such as Ancil Torres and the Torres Foundation, the visually impaired people of Trinidad and Tobago can now be given the empowerment they need to transition from the bleak and stagnant world of weaving baskets to the bright and limitless possibilities of information technology.

LESSONS LEARNT

It is always an inspirational feeling when you speak or come into contact with a differently-able person who has been successful in their life. It makes you feel that whatever problems you have it can be overcome because of the struggles that these
individuals have endured. Mr. Ancil Torres is an example of one of these inspirational and exceptional individuals. He has triumphed over the negative connotation of visually impaired individuals not being able to function 'normally' within the society.

As far as Mr. Torres is concerned Trinidad has a long way to go in the way that persons with disabilities are treated. He maintains that there is still that old belief that persons with disabilities cannot function independently. He believes though that with time and education, things will change for the positive and people will let go of the traditional views of disability and adopt a more realistic and modern viewpoint.

I share this view with him, because in conducting this research I could not help but notice the difference in the way disabled persons are treated in the United States when compared to Trinidad. Persons in Trinidad seem to still subscribe to the Medical and Social Model of Disability.

Although I have never faced the problem of discrimination I can understand what it must be like to have to prove yourself to people who doubt you. For one it makes you a stronger person and it tends to make you want to do so much better to show those people that they were wrong. It's that aspect I can say I share with persons with disabilities. In meeting with Mr. Torres and learning about how he overcame his problem with discrimination and the success that he has gained through his hard work it allows you the opportunity to want to be a success yourself amidst any obstacles that come in your way.

I have learnt that it is all about believing in yourself, asserting your independence and being willing to lend a hand to those who are less fortunate than you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Torres Foundation for giving me the personal information that allowed me to get in contact with Mr. Ancil Torres.

I would like to graciously thank Mr. Ancil Torres for taking the time to help me with this project and for giving me the permission to use the information which was available on the websites.
References:
http://www.trinidadexpress.com
http://www.torresfoundation.org
http://www.marfan.org

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