

Braille House – 125 years of the unseen library

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125 years ago (in 1897) a group of women got together in Brisbane when they realised there were no books available for children who were blind or had low vision. That is when Braille House began as the Queensland Braille Writing Association by a group of women including the then Governor's wife Lady Lamington (yes - the lady the Lamington is named after - but that's another story) to produce books for the vision impaired.

The organisation has now grown into Braille House, and we continue the important work of transcribing books and other information into braille and other accessible formats for people who are blind or have low vision. We also tutor in braille and moon and we provide all types of braille, moon, large print, maps and more.

Braille House's mission has not changed in 125 years: "To provide braille tuition and reading material to empower people who are blind or who have low vision to live with dignity and independence".

Why is braille important today?

Vision, the most dominant of our senses, plays a critical role in every facet and stage of our lives. We take vision for granted, but without vision, we struggle to learn to walk, to read, to participate in school, and to work. Vision impairment has serious consequences for the individual across their lifetime.

Braille empowers people who are blind or have low vision to be literate. Braille use has a significant impact on literacy. Reading, writing, spelling, punctuation, and grammar in general, are the fundamentals of education, and without these basic foundations individuals are disadvantaged. Braille is the tool used by people with a vision impairment to learn these important educational elements.

These tiny dots support people to live independently, attain their desired level of education, increase their chances for employment and enable them to interact with communities just like everyone else. Braille is essential for literacy among the blind. A recent study found that braille literacy is uniquely associated with well-being and self-esteem among legally blind adults. Participants who learned braille early in childhood reported the highest well-being levels.

Here are some facts about Braille House and vision impairment:

- The Braille House library contains over 16,000 volumes of braille, across more than 7,000 titles.
- The Braille House library houses Australia's only Moon library.
- Approx. 23,712 volunteer hours performed in 2019/20 financial year.
- In Australia, only about 3% of print material is available in an accessible format.
- For every 100 books a sighted child has access to, there are just 5 for a vision impaired child.
- A blind person only has a one in ten chance of receiving an education or getting a job because of a lack of accessible information.
- Research tells us there is a strong link between depression and chronic illnesses such as vision loss.
- People who are blind and have access to braille have a higher chance of finishing university and achieving their goals if they have access to braille resources.

It is estimated that there were over 575,000 people who were blind or had vision loss living in Australia in 2017, and this is projected to grow to over 800,000 by 2030. We await the updated figures, but this rapid increase is due to the ageing population and the fact that the risk of eye disease increases three-fold for each decade over the age of 40. The situation is worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who experience six times the rate of blindness and three times the rate of vision impairment in comparison to the rest of the population.

The annual economic cost attributable to blindness and vision impairment is estimated to be \$16 billion, with the social and personal cost to individuals and their families further adding to the impact on Australian communities. In comparison to the general population, people who are blind or vision impaired have more than four times the rate of unemployment, suffer twice as many falls, have three times the risk of depression, are admitted to residential care three years earlier and often lose confidence to independently manage everyday life. Anecdotally, service providers have examples that people who receive specialist braille services are able to maintain employment, remain at home and live independently and in doing so can be more self-sufficient and cost less in government supports which benefits the whole community (Source: Vision2020 Australia Report).

So what's next?

Braille House continues to be at the forefront of developing tactile tools that enhance the lives of children and adults who are blind or have low vision. This includes reaching out to governments and organisations to educate them on how

they can make their information more accessible to people who are vision impaired.

Braille House also has a focus on research and development of products that has led to some interesting innovations. These include the Tactile QR Code Indicators (stickers that go over a QR Code that indicate where to scan), and the Braille Emergency Evacuation Information Packs that were developed to provide information for people who are faced with an emergency situation such as fire, flood, or cyclone. Braille House has even 3D printed prototype braille buttons for a sheet company to identify the corners of a fitted sheet that have been developed to include people with disabilities.

Health information is also very important to everyone, and Braille House is working to develop a range of resources in braille and tactile formats that will help patients, and visitors to health facilities, to navigate and understand what is happening to them, and around them. This will lead to better health outcomes as they will feel more comfortable, be able to absorb information better and have a more thorough understanding of their condition and treatment. These may include maps, tactile anatomical representations, treatment and rehabilitation information, and even braille on packaging to identify contents and communicate directions for use.

To learn more about Braille house you can visit www.braillehouse.org.au



