

# Note: Disability Matters

A new year is upon us. I hope that this is the year we will all come out of the pandemic. That we will make serious efforts at environment protection; ensure peaceful conflict resolution; and bridge inequalities among and within nations. My best wishes for 2023 to all our friends, colleagues, and partners.

Like every year this year as well we observed on December 3rd as the **World Disability day** also known as **International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD)**. Living with a disability is no easy task. Persons with disabilities experience severe limitations because of a lack of supportive infrastructure, social discrimination, poorer health, and shorter life spans. In fact, this is a reality in most countries. Vision loss and blindness result in a serious form of disability. As a responsible eye care organization, we are very sensitive to sight loss and all other forms of disability. Our teams at the Institute of Vision Rehabilitation (IVR) strive to bring hope and happiness to the lives of the differently abled individuals and their families we get to work with.

## Our Journey

LVPEI began to formally work with people who had incurable blindness in 1992 - within 5 years of the inception of our organisation – when we made Vision Rehabilitation services one of our core functional arms. Beginning with counselling services for people who need them, today, the Institute of Vision Rehabilitation (IVR) is an Institute of Excellence and a Global Resource Centre. The institute's services are available across our network in 4 states (Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Karnataka). IVR is also engaged in community-based rehabilitation and tele-rehabilitation services to extend our reach.

The institute offers a wide range of services for differently abled individuals: from early intervention for infants and toddlers, training to master skills in daily living tasks and even livelihood training for working-age adults. The early intervention program trains infants and toddlers with vision and other disabilities in cognition, compensatory mechanisms, fine motor and gross motor skills, language, and socialization. Our **Special Needs Vision Clinics (SNVC)** provide visual and perceptual skills training through software that also measures the progress of the persons in terms of precision and response time.

*Potluri Venkatesh was born with severe vision impairment and was referred to IVR when he was two-and-half years old. At three, Venkatesh was admitted to the Marica school in Hyderabad. The rehabilitation team approached the school and explained his learning needs. The school responded by sending two teachers to acquire training in braille, abacus, and audio learning methods. Venkatesh was amazing in elementary school, but struggled to gain*

*admission for higher grades. This was not surprising to our team as most schools have poor awareness about the academic skills of persons with vision impairment...*

### Volunteer support

To facilitate education and the literary pursuits of visually challenged children and adults we started the **Digital Audio Library** in 2011. These libraries are present in all our tertiary centres and produce audiobooks so that students and other individuals with vision loss (but with intact auditory functions) can access reading material. To date 1,623 audiobooks covering a wide range of subjects and syllabi from the state, central and university-based curricula, including competitive exams, have been produced in these libraries. These audiobooks have been accessed by more than 15,000 individuals with severe vision loss from both urban and rural areas, including 80 special schools. I would like to complement the 1,085 volunteers from across the country and overseas, who lent their voice to create these precious resources.

*Venkatesh needed to secure admission for higher grades and our rehabilitation team made every effort to persuade schools in Hyderabad to take him in. Finally, the Meridian school admitted him on a provisional basis at first--but Venkatesh's excellence convinced them to offer him a full seat. Venkatesh completed his secondary and higher secondary education with a 92% score, and with math and science as his major subjects. He decided to become engineer. Again, he was denied permission to appear for the relevant entrance examination because of his impairment. By now, Venkatesh knew enough to not lose heart; he excelled in the committee interviews and got a seat in the computer engineering stream...*

### Productive lives

Financial independence plays a crucial role in bringing equality and dignity to the lives of differently abled individuals. Therefore, equipping them with job ready skills and facilitating inclusive hiring by sensitising employers are a part of our rehabilitation program. At our IVR we provide counselling and facilitate preparation for government & banking examinations, corporate skill development, computer skills and mobile accessibility training. The institute has a fully-equipped IT training centre where using assistive technologies, our clients are trained in different computer skills including programming. In addition, we also run several vocational training courses such as making of jute and cloth bags, candles, jewellery, and home décor items. We have successfully helped place 350 individuals across multiple job sectors like IT (Apple, IBM, TCS, Accenture, Tech Mahindra, Wipro, Sisco, Inno minds, Amazon), finance, banking, education, healthcare, hospitality, and the judiciary. The Institute has also helped 118 individuals to become self-employed.

*With support from peers and teachers, and with the help of assistive technology, Venkatesh completed his degree and interned at the Microsoft India Development Center and Microsoft*

*Research. Venkatesh went on to complete his PhD from the University of Washington, Seattle, and did fellowships with companies like Google and Apple. Today, he loves to teach programming to persons with vision impairment.*

### Networks of support

It is equally important to offer support to parents and other family members who are involved in the care of individuals with disability. We periodically organize **parent-family programs** wherein parents or family members of such individuals meet and interact with each other and a variety of subject matter experts. The institute also runs an online and phone-line helpline service. Individuals with vision impairment and their families, well-wishers, or other organizations working for their benefit can call the **helpline** for information on a wide variety of topics related to rehabilitation services, social benefit schemes, education, employment etc.

Over the past 30 years, more than 240,000 individuals have benefited from our rehabilitation support services and Potluri Venkatesh is one such individual we are proud of. Venkatesh is not alone. In the absence of correct guidance, support system and right information many others like Venkatesh are stifled from leading a life of fulfilment. The true purpose of observing IDPD will be served when every person with disability and their family can feel confident that they are not discriminated against and have every possible opportunity to attain the full potential of their capabilities.

-Prashant Garg