

## **Steven M. Rothstein**

Earlier this month we started with our 178th year of service. We started in 1849. It is the first school for the blind in the United States, and over a hundred years ago, Helen Keller was there with her teacher, Anne Sullivan. They communicated with all forms of devices whether it is hand-on-hand sign language, a method where Helen put her hand on Anne's mouth, as well as Braille. Just as today, this method is to use all forms of communication, and we use all forms of technology because everyone we deal with is a little different.

We work today in 61 countries around the world providing services, and actually I had the chance to talk to other partners in the audience and in different panels that are working with us. What we've seen while working in these countries is more opportunities and growth. There has been significant movement but still there is so much more to go. In the Millennium Goals, a key element is the universal right to education. As we are sitting here this morning, there are 5 million children that are blind that do not have the right education. Numbers are powerful and there are several times more children with other difficulty. Two weeks ago, in a Caribbean country we work in, I met a man whose nine year old daughter is deaf and blind, she started 2 months ago and I asked them why she just started school? They said that they were told she did not have the right to go to school. Even today, with all the progress that we have, if children don't have the right to education, then they are not exposed to any kind of technology. The critical underpinning of everything is education for all, and that means that there are schools in every society wherein families are involved, whether it be in special ways through organization or through parents.

Education for all as early as possible is critical. The second key element in related is literacy. For individuals who are blind and low vision, for those who are not literate in Braille there is a 70 percent, some people say 80 percent unemployment rate, 70 to 80 percent unemployment for those not literate in Braille. For those who use Braille, there is a 20 percent unemployment rate. So the numbers are really reverse. Braille is the single largest factor, Braille literacy, in adapting, in job creation, and in many other things for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. One element to reach that is libraries, and that having accessible libraries, whether it would be books on tapes, flash memory,

Braille, large print, and in some countries there are very comprehensive set of services to the libraries, and in others there is so much that needs to be done. To have accessible libraries in digital format is critical. Obviously the work with television and videos and websites is critical. Universal access to literacy is so critical. One thing that we do is make a device called a mechanical Braille writer. It's sold in about a hundred and forty countries all over the world. But I've gone to numerous countries. I've probably been to 30 countries where there are schools for the blind and there aren't enough basic Braille writers. There are so many places in the world where individuals who are blind don't have the basic writing device, and those are critical. So again, literacy is the second element.

The third element is technology, and one that came out a few months ago is something called K-NFB Reader. It size of the palm of the hand. It takes pictures of anything in print, and then with voice output, it can read it to you. It creates an enormous opportunity for accessibility. There are a lot of Braille readers out there. The idea is how you communicate, whether it would be track balls, whether be large print, whether be devices that can take intelli-keys that were mentioned or taking keys that, instead of letters, having pictures on them. So we have all kinds of those. We started 178 years ago, and the assumption was that someone who was deaf and blind couldn't communicate, that they couldn't think. There had never been anyone who had been deaf and blind who was formally educated. Our philosophy is simple, that we can communicate with everyone. I really believe we can do that. In summary, we have an expression at Perkins that is really appropriate for what we did today, and that is "working together, all we see is possibility."