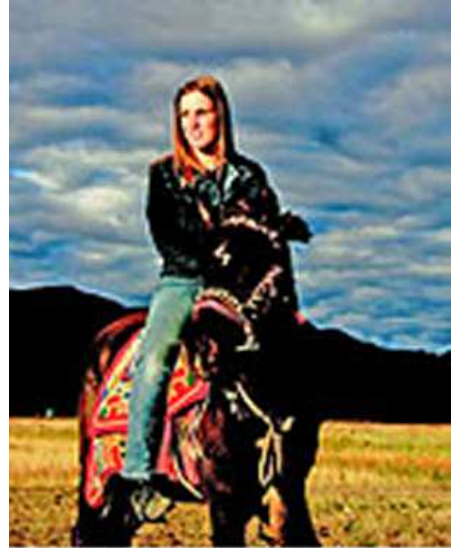


Sabriye Tenberken¹ Germany (1970-)

I've been a teacher, and I know that teachers often get discouraged and worry that their students are not learning anything. Well, you never know what effects your teaching might have. Take the case of Sabriye Tenberken.

When she was in the eighth grade, Sabriye went with her class on a field trip to a museum where the students were allowed to handle items from Tibet during the lesson on Tibet's customs, religion, and history. Sabriye's imagination was captured. She began to dream of going to Tibet and starting a school for the blind there. Over and over she was told this was impossible, but she has done it, and much more.



Sabriye Tenberken
(Photo by Paul Kronenberg)

Getting Ready

In order to prepare herself for future work in Tibet, Sabriye majored in Central Asian Studies at the University of Bonn and did a master's degree in Tibetology. Since she is blind (has been from the age of 12), she had to find a way to be able to study the printed Tibetan-language class materials. She did have a machine available that would read German text and create German Braille from it. No system existed to create Braille from written Tibetan, however, so she invented one for her own use. Later it became the official Braille system for Tibetan.

She thought that in order to establish a school in Tibet she first should go to China and obtain official approval. She went to Beijing — alone. After completing an intensive course in Chinese, she continued on to Chengdo, and finally to Kangding at 11,000 feet, at the edge of the vast, mountainous Tibetan territory.

Speaking in Chinese and Tibetan, she met with officials and struggled to explain her mission. Officials insisted that foreigners were forbidden to visit Tibet, though they warmed up a bit when she assured them that her mission was not political, but only to help blind people. Government officials told her there were no blind people in Tibet, though this was not true.² They

"There should be no limits for the blind."

--Sabriye Tenberken
--In: Sautter and Farouky,
2004

¹ Pronounced Sah-bree-yah Ten-burr-ken

² Tibet has per capita twice the number of blind people (1 person in 70) as the global average, mainly because of the intense sun exposure at its high altitudes. Many Tibetans believe that blindness is a punishment for misdeeds in a previous life, or due to possession by demons.

emphasized the dangers of getting around in such a mountainous area with few and dangerous roads. Finally, they suggested she should raise the money for the school and hand it over to them. This was not the first, nor the last, time that Sabriye heard this suggestion. A few people were honest and told her what they really thought: that she could not carry out the project she had in mind because she is blind.

How Could She Go Anywhere Alone?

Sabriye explains in her book (Tenberken, 2003) that she is able to move about and do things alone because, like other blind people, her senses of hearing, smell, and touch (especially through her white cane) are much more highly developed than a sighted person's are³. She uses them to make her own mental map of "landmarks" which she can then use to walk through a known area as quickly as a sighted person. Sounds, their distance and location, and the time spaces between them are especially important, together with odors of people and things they wear, carry, or sell. Through her cane, she gets essential information about the ground — hard, soft, bumpy, flat, rocky, wet, dry — and obstacles or possible things to guide her, such as sidewalks, curbs, or walls.

She also relies on people's willingness to help her if she needs it. She stands there waiting, and usually finds that eventually someone will stop to see if she needs help. This worked even in China in 1997 when people had no idea what a white cane was.

No Limits

Sabriye was not discouraged by the fact that the best or only method of transport in much of Tibet is by horseback, for she is an expert rider. As a teenager, she attended a school where students were encouraged to do a huge variety of activities in addition to their regular schoolwork, in order to instill self-confidence and the ability to know for themselves what their limits might be, regardless of what sighted people⁴, however well-meaning, might say.

It was this sense of self-confidence that Sabriye was planning to instill in her own students.

After her interesting but discouraging (as far as the school was concerned) trip to China, Sabriye decided to go directly to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. There she spent a couple of months exploring the narrow streets, experiencing the sounds and odors of merchants, restaurants, street stands, beggars, praying monks, tourists, and the "assortment of picturesque and often bizarre characters" that Lhasa attracts. (Tenberken, 2003, p.35) She made friends there too. One of them, Paul Kronenberg later joined her at her school. After gradually falling in love, they ended up life partners as well.

"We want to show the kids that they don't have to be ashamed. We want them to stand up and say, 'I am blind, not stupid!'. They need to be proud of themselves, gather the strength to cope with discrimination and go out there as messengers for what they've learned."

-- Sabriye Tenberken
-- In: Estulin and Sautter,
2004

³ In a blind person's brain, the areas usually devoted to sight get rewired and now they instead are used for the other senses. A great book on the subject of how the brain rewires itself depending on the physical activities of a person is *The Brain That Changes Itself*, by Norman Doidge, 2007).

⁴ Sighted people = people who can see -- a new but increasingly accepted phrase

Finding Students

Once she got permission for the school, Sabriye set about finding students. Most of the first students at the school came from a ten-day horseback trip that Sabriye made (despite the horror cries from many people), during the trip to Lhasa described above.

She and three companions (two Tibetan, one Israeli), traveling over sometimes dangerous terrain, visited a number of remote villages to assess the needs and situation of blind children. Dolma, one of women who accompanied her, knew much of this area well, and took Sabriye to visit blind children she knew of. Sometimes villagers told Sabriye about blind children in other villages, so they went there too. By the end of the trip they had identified eight children of the right age who wanted to attend the school when it opened, and whose parents were willing to let them go to.

Dolma also took Sabriye to meet blind children she had noticed on the streets of Lhasa, and some of these, also, eventually became students.

At that time, the situation of most blind children in Tibet was awful. In a few communities some attempt was made to include them, but in most cases they were pushed aside or even hidden or abandoned in the streets. Some were forced by their families to "earn a living" for the entire family by begging in the street. There existed no program whatsoever in Tibet to help blind children become productive citizens.

Founding and Accomplishments

The Rehabilitation and Training Center for the Blind, Tibet, opened in 1998. In 1990, the school moved to a house in Lhasa which they were able to buy, due to the generosity of the owner; and which is still the location of the school.

The children are taught English, Mandarin, Tibetan, math, and computer skills. In addition, they learn practical skills like making a bed, cooking, walking with a cane, and how to use all their senses to help them get around.

As new students joined the school, they found teachers who had the skills and love necessary to teach blind children. It took time for the school to grow, and there were a few setbacks and problems; but by August, 2005, the school had 37 students living there, ranging in age from 3-19 years, with six teachers and 5 staff. It was costing about \$2,000 US (in 2005 dollars) a month to run the project (Mahoney, 2005).

In recent years, the program has expanded considerably. These days, after completing their basic education students have a choice of returning to their villages, continuing in normal school with sighted children, or training for a vocation. So far they have developed programs in medical massage (a vocation reserved in China for blind people), animal husbandry, cheese-making, butter and milk production, and vegetable production. The first cheese, produced in 2002 was named "Lhasarella Naturelle." Recently they have added productive crafts, such as carpet weaving. There is a focus on

"After they (the children) came here, they learned that there are other blind people who could do things that their parents never trusted them to do. They started to gain confidence, and they started to realize that it doesn't matter if you're blind or sighted... it's just a matter of using the abilities you have, and not only concentrating on your disability."

-- Sabriye Tenberken
-- In: Voice of America,
2008

appropriate technology⁵ and methods that students can also use in their home cities and villages. (Blind Without Borders, 2006, 2007)

In addition to the school in Lhasa proper, they are now running a farm where they have a dairy herd, pigs, poultry, and a number of riding horses. They are experimenting with composting, mini square-meter greenhouses and other arrangements suited to blind gardeners and farmers. They grow grain and feed for the animals. A number of local day-students now attend, including adults who have become blind and need to learn how to adapt to this and still continue making a living doing farming.

The first students to graduate from the massage therapy curriculum established a clinic; and various graduates have joined them and helped expand it and the services offered. Another student opened a tea-house. Some graduating students have become teachers and managers at the school.

The children that return to their villages arrive with new skills, often skills that are highly valued (such as the ability to read, and to translate English or Chinese), so that they are seen as useful and become valued members of their communities for the first time.

Without Borders

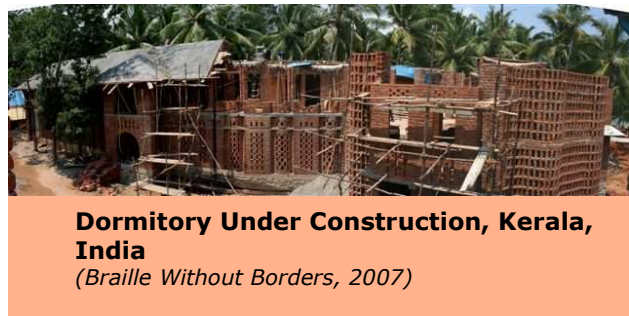
Over the years Sabriye and Paul have gradually transferred the responsibilities for the operation of the Tibet projects, including curriculum development and planning, bookkeeping, and the all-important negotiating with government officials, to the Tibetan staff.

In 2002, the organization adopted the name Braille Without Borders (BWB), an expression of Sabriye and Paul's huge vision of making educational opportunities available to the blind all over the world. In the 2006 annual report Sabriye wrote that she and Paul had traveled around the world several times that year raising money for Tibet and the new center in India.

Students from the school have become international travelers as well. In 2006-7, students went for special training to Malaysia (computer training), Holland (cheese-making), and China (medical massage training) (and this is not a complete list!). The school received visitors from abroad as well, some of whom provided special training courses.

BWB Goes International

BWB's international training center (International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs (Thiruvananthapuram)), in the south of India about 10 Km from Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala is scheduled to open in June, 2008. There will be a one-year training including diverse skills that will enable blind



⁵ From Wikipedia: "Appropriate technology (AT) is technology that is designed with special consideration to the community it is intended for." In general it should be something that can be produced and maintained using locally available resources.

students to return to their own countries and establish BWB training centers, supported by local government funding. (For more information, see the BWB website).

It will be interesting and exciting to follow the development of BWB in the future. If Sabriye and Paul manage to empower people to replicate in other countries what they have done in Tibet, their grand vision may well become reality. Even more important, their experience will be a valuable contribution to our growing fund of knowledge about how citizens can organize and act to make the great changes that this world needs. They have become part of the growing Social Entrepreneur movement which, according to some, has the power to change the world. (Bornstein, 2007)

References and Further Reading

The information in the article above came from the following sources

Bornstein, D. 2007 *How to Change the World*. Social Entrepreneurs and Power of New Ideas. Oxford University Press.

Braille Without Borders, 2006. *Annual Report 2006* Braille Without Borders website: <http://www.braillewithoutborders.org/ENGLISH/annualreport2006.html>

Braille Without Borders, 2007. *Newsletter* August 2007. Braille Without Borders website: http://www.braillewithoutborders.org/ENGLISH/newsletter_JUL07.html

Estulin, C., and Sautter, U. 2004. *Sabriye Tenberken: Blind, Yet a Visionary*. TimeAsia Web Site at: http://www.time.com/time/asia/2004/heroes/hsabriye_tenberken.html Accessed 12/15/2008.

Haoran, Chai 2005. Sabriye Tenberken & Paul Kronenberg - *Fighting Blindness in Tibet* From CCTV website: <http://www.cctv.com/program/UpClose/20051101/100252.shtml>. Accessed 12/15/2008

Mahoney, Rosemary 2005. *Phenomenal Woman: Sabriye Tenberken*. In: O, The Oprah Magazine, August 2005. On line at: http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/rys_omag_200508_phenom/1 Accessed 12/18/08

Sautter, U. and Farouky, J. 2004. *The Visionary*. From Time Europe Magazine (Oct 11, 2004) website posted 10/2/2004. <http://www.time.com/time/europe/hero2004/tenberken.html> Accessed 12/20/08

Tenberken, S. 2003 *My Path Leads to Tibet*. Arcade Publishing, N.Y. Entertaining, plenty of adventure, yet also shows the kinds of troubles with governmental authorities and funding organizations that a project of this kind can have, as well as the difficulties for a foreigner of life in Tibet. Could be a fun book for English-reading practice.

Vanessa from Indonesia, 2006 *Woman Hero: Sabriye Tenberken*. At the My Hero website:

http://www.myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=Tenberken_stursula_indonesia_06
Accessed 12/15/08

Voice of America web site, 2005. *Braille Without Borders gives new hope to blind children in Tibet.* 8/16/2005. At: <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2005-08/2005-08-16-voa25.cfm> Accessed 1/13/08.

Wikipedia *Sabriye Tenberken.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabriye_Tenberken
Accessed 12/15/08.

You can find several interviews of Sabriye on the web, as well as information about the many awards they have received, books written, and a film that was produced about some of their students called Blindsight, where they attempted to climb Lakhpa, a 7100 m peak adjacent to Everest.

Discussion or Essay Questions

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. If you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.

1. Have you ever experienced (as a child or as an adult) being "helped" by a well-meaning person when you really didn't want or need help? Describe what happened. What did you do? How did you feel?
2. Have you ever known a person who was or who became not "normal"? Describe the person and then describe your relationship with him or her. What was or is the hardest thing for you in the relationship? Did you learn or have you learned anything or grown personally from it?
3. Trust is an important element in interactions between people. Describe at least four ways Sabriye's project depended on developing trust between her and others-- two ways she had to trust others, and two ways others had to trust her in order for her project to be successful.
4. Go to the Ashoka website http://www.ashoka.org/social_entrepreneur and find out how they define "social entrepreneur". Write this definition in your own words. What does Ashoka do, and why? Then look around on the website and find an interesting person or project they have supported. Write a few paragraphs about what you found. Describe what you found to another classmate.

Notice to Reader

This is one out of fifteen stories written especially for English-learners featured in [*Extraordinary People From Around the World*](#), by Patricia F. Neyman, © Patricia F. Neyman, 2008, except for any pictures therein included. You may make copies for yourself, your class, or your school, but may not reproduce it for profit.

I welcome feedback about this story. Compliments and helpful suggestions are especially appreciated. You can find the email address at the page linked to above.