



ADAPTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR
REHABILITATION, INTEGRATION
AND EMPOWERMENT OF THE
VISUALLY IMPAIRED



*"Where the blind can see through
computers"*

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Asia has its First Totally Blind Medical Transcriptionist Perseverance Does It



By Carol Catacutan

Blind due to a gunshot wound to the head, Michael Borgonia, a

former government physician from Balamban Cebu, signed last Friday, June 24, 2005, a one-year contract with TTSI or Total Transcription Solutions Inc. to be the first totally blind medical transcriptionist not only in the Philippines but in Asia. Borgonia, 37, qualified for the home medical transcriptionist requirement of TTSI after almost a year of training at Project ATTRAC or the Adaptive Technology Training Resource and Access Center program of ATRIEV or Adaptive Technology For Rehabilitation, Integration and Empowerment of the Visually Impaired, a non-government organization whose core program is to give computer training to blind and visually impaired persons. Project ATTRAC is implemented in partnership with Overbrook/Nippon Network on Educational Technology (ON-NET), Christian Blind Mission (CBM) STI Foundation on Leadership in Information Technology and Education (STI-FLITE) and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA).

Total Transcription Solutions Inc. (TTSI) is one of the country's leading medical transcription companies that provides offshore medical transcription services to hospitals, clinics, group and individual practices. Myla Rose Mundo-Reyes, TTSI's Managing Director admits that initially, they were apprehensive in dealing with visually impaired persons. "But when we saw the screen reader software, and we noted that the only impairment was the eyesight, it gave us a sense of hope," Reyes explains. TTSI was the first medical transcription company that has considered blind persons as on-the-job trainees.

"When I came to ATRIEV in July 2004, I only have one advantage that qualified me for the training and that is my medical background," Borgonia recalls. The basic training lasted for five months, which is comprised of computer LITERACY, English grammar and medical terminology and listening/transcription skills. Transcription is the translation of recorded audio dictations into electronic format. The training is tedious," Carol Catacutan, ATRIEV'S totally blind Training

Director, explains, "aside from the five-month basic training the on-the-job training is indefinite."

Also crucial in the training is the interface of the screen reader program with that of the software used by the transcription company. A screen reader program allows a blind person to manipulate the computer through a vocal response. Michael had to memorize all the key commands including editing commands in order to meet TTSI's stringent qualification requirements.

Surviving the Trauma

In March 2001, on his way out from Balamban District hospital--where he has served as a government physician for more than seven years--Michael was intentionally shot in the head by a hired gunman. He was given immediate attention in the district hospital but was immediately rushed to Cebu Doctors Hospital where the bullet was removed. After the shot, I was still conscious but my sight blacked-out instantly. I knew that I'll live but I also knew that my sight is already gone." Michael recounts. "At that time, I was just praying for his life." Malou, Michael's wife recalls. "Hindi ko iniisip na ma-blind siya." She continues.

After three weeks, Michael was brought to Manila for another surgery in an attempt to save his eyesight. "As a medical doctor myself, I knew right then and there that I had lost my sight permanently." Michael narrates. "When the doctors told me to pray for a miracle, you can read between the lines..." " Malou relates. "Sa akin, ang hirap isipin ang nangyari pero wala naman akong magawa... So I just have to accept it." She continues trying to fight back her tears. " "Wala na akong magagawa. Lyon na. Kahit ano pa ang gawin ko, kahit pa maparusahan ang gumawa noon, hindi na naman maibabalik pa." Michael admits in resignation.

His life suddenly made a 360-degree turn-around. For three whole months after the shooting incident, Michael experienced

sleepless nights or even waking up in the middle of sleep. Being the father of four primary school-aged boys, Michael's blindness meant loss of income. At that time we were at the stage na maayos na ang buhay naming tapos biglang naputol. I was afraid financially." Malou confesses. His parents and two younger siblings, however, assured his family of financial support. For three long years, Michael just stayed at home sleeping, watching TV, and practically doing nothing.

Starting Over Again

In 2004, Michael saw the interview of Lourdes Borgonia, now ATRIEV's Associate Instructor, in a television news program. "I got interested in the idea that blind people can use computers plus the fact that Lourdes and I have the same family name," Michael explains.

Going to Manila for the training was a major decision for the family. "I was supportive of his training in Manila," Malou begins, "I really wanted him to go because I wanted Michael to do something with his time. To get back his self confidence." She continues. But Michael was the one who was reluctant to go to Manila. "He was saying,"Ano daw ang gagawin niya sa Manila? Traffic daw sa Manila? Sino daw ang magiging guide niya? wala daw siyang alam sa Manila..." siya ang takot." Malou describes. Malou and Michael's family kept on urging him to go. After much prodding, Michael agreed. In Manila, Jr, Michael's youngest brother, took care of him.

Facing the Challenge

When I was still sighted, I had no interest in computers," Michael confesses. In less than a year, however, Michael has reached the minimum speed requirement of 45 words per minute. All he needed was to meet TTSI's accuracy standards. .

The first on-the-job training was held at the ATRIEV Training Center in STI College Cubao. ATRIEV provided eight visually impaired trainees with the computer units, screen reader software as well as electronic medical references. TTSI provided practice voice files to the trainees with an expressed agreement with all concerned of utmost confidentiality. The OJT lasted for eight weeks and Michael got the highest accuracy scores. He, however, still did not meet the 98% accuracy requirement of TTSI.

"We thought that it's possible for blind people to really do transcription because of the technology," Reyes explains. "But we also knew that it's not going to be an easy task." She goes on. "As you know, medical transcription is more than just a secretarial job and it really takes an intelligent person to do transcription." She concludes.

One More Chance

From May 24, 2005 to June 17, 2005, only the top two ATRIEV trainees were given the last chance by TTSI to make it to their standards. "Carol's persistence paid off," says Reyes. "She really kept on asking for more chances for her students and when we saw that some of them showed promise, we gave them another chance." She continues.

"For me, the biggest challenge was how to communicate and feedback to the trainees." Lorena "Ena" Llanda, TTSI Account Manager says. "Michael started with a 93% accuracy increasing steadily every week with 96% on his fourth week," she goes on. "After the fourth week, we decided to stop giving him practice files and deliberate on Michael's work," Marj Muli-Paz, TTSI's Operations Manager explains. "After the deliberations, we decided to offer Michael a one-year contract as a home medical transcriptionist." Paz continues.

"I was in tears when I read Ms. Marj's e-mail about the good

news," Catacutan recalls. "I have lost potential medical transcriptionists due to financial reasons and Michael was the only one left," she confesses. "There was a time during the OJT when Michael called me up and he said he wanted to go home," Malou reveals. "I was also losing hope because I was not sure where my training was going to," Michael admits. "But I told him to stay on and finish the training," Malou narrates. "Whether he makes it or not, at least he completed the training and did not give up." She says.

"When Michael told me about the good news, I was not at all surprised because I was already expecting it. I knew he would make it." Malou says with confidence. "Michael should be proud of himself," Reyes begins. "What I would like to highlight is that we didn't look at Mike's limits. Because at the end of the day, TTSI's main goal is to survive as a profitable MT service organization. Our evaluation was based on his ability to meet our requirements. The standards are the same as what we expect from the rest of the able-bodied persons." Reyes points out. "He proved himself worthy to be a medical Transcriptionist and he will serve as an inspiration to others." Paz adds.

A New Beginning

As Michael Borgonia flies back home to Cebu to be reunited with his family, he now carries with him a new hope and renewed confidence that he can still be productive. He did not only earn the distinction of becoming the first blind medical transcriptionist in Asia but of a man who has overcome trauma and pain and still turn out to be the best that he can be.

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Krissy's World



*By Ann Corvera
The Philippine STAR 09/19/2005*

Early this year, an executive of a computer school for the blind was crossing her fingers, wishing that one of their female graduates could break into the mainstream job market. And in April, it happened, and last Wednesday, NetWorks got the chance to talk to this young achiever, whom Carol Catacutan, training director of ATRIEV, or Adaptive Technology for Rehabilitation, Integration and Empowerment of the Visually Impaired, described as "the first blind person to qualify and work in a corporate environment."

That corporate environment is TeleTech, a global provider of business process outsourcing and customer management solutions, where Criselda "Krissy" Bisda works as a recruitment associate.

Krissy signed an employment contract with TeleTech on April 15, "a milestone in call center history," as Carol, herself an ATRIEV graduate, put it.

"I feel very happy about it because not too many get that chance. I was able to reach my short-term goals that is, to work and it's related to the course I took up," Krissy recalled in fluent English to NetWorks in an interview at their office in Robinson's Plaza in Novaliches, Quezon City.

Krissy, a towering 21-year-old at 5'7", graduated with a degree in psychology at the Philippine Women's University in Manila. "I chose psychology because I like studying people and I am curious about human behavior and to try and understand it."

Krissy's condition never stopped her from pursuing her dream of practicing her degree in the so-called real world. Her perseverance, coupled with her smarts and confidence, led ATRIEV to make her a candidate for employment at Teletech.

Krissy, who was diagnosed with a progressive degeneration of the retina called retinitis pigmentosa at age three, was one of five pre-screened visually impaired applicants recommended by ATRIEV to TeleTech.

It was TeleTech vice president and general manager Craig Reines who identified the recruitment associate position that may be fit for the blind.

"We should not be limited by the screen reader software. There's a host of other jobs that a blind person may be able to do that may not require the software interface," Reines explains as a screen reader software that allows blind people to manipulate the computer through a vocal response unfortunately did not interface with the call center's proprietary software.

Having graduated from ATRIEV where she took up a basic computer literacy program under the Adaptive Technology for Training, Resource and Access Center last year, Krissy was well-versed with the popular software called JAWS, or job access with speech, which ATRIEV uses as a text-to-speech voice synthesizer application and screen reader program.

"ATRIEV honed my skills in computers and I became productive with JAWS," Krissy said.

"It (JAWS) reads everything. It has a lot of features like telling us

the color of the texts and the background. I can use it in Excel, use it for chat, to join fora and I don't have to use a mouse. There is a lot of software for the blind although JAWS is the popular one," Krissy said. "JAWS though would be enough for the type of work that I'm doing."

As a recruitment associate, Krissy explained, she interviews applicants in the initial stages involving the assessment of their communication and behavioral skills.

Another software, though not specifically for the blind, but friendly to the visually impaired is the Avaya softphone," Krissy said.

"It acts like a receiver of the phone and we use it for phone screening. It is installed in a computer and it is connected to a hard phone," she said, explaining that part of the hiring process at TeleTech is for her to conduct phone interviews.

"One of the interviews is pre-recorded wherein TeleTech has a language assessment line and the applicant's voice is recorded, assessed and graded," she said.

Krissy's present status was borne out of productive meetings between TeleTech and ATRIEV, through its chairman Peter Wallace who introduced Carol and ATRIEV founding chairman Tony Llanes to Reines. And it is through ATRIEV that Wallace actively campaigns for the employment of qualified visually impaired persons among multinational companies.

Driven To Succeed

Despite the demands of the job amid the stiff jostling of applicants to get into the call center industry, Krissy keeps her composure and doesn't mind working long hours.

She noted that a huge amount of patience is required for what

she does as she encounters all types of people every day.

"A lot (of people) don't follow instructions or are impatient," she amusedly explained. "Usually, I don't take it negatively. It's really part of our job because we are exposed to people. In this job, you need to be strong and not too emotional. The key being I enjoy what I do."

Her motivation in spite of the obstacles of her condition, she said, comes from "internal and external factors."

"My family inspires me as well as (I inspire) myself," said Krissy, the eldest of three siblings, who went through eye surgery when she was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa that saved her sight until she gradually lost it upon reaching elementary grades.

In college, Krissy continued to be an achiever as she won writing contests and quiz bees. Even in sports, Krissy excelled, and swimming became her favorite. Krissy was twice awarded the title Female Swimmer of the Year by the Resources of the Blind Inc. during summer camps in 1991 and 2001, Carol wrote of Krissy. She also won first prize in swimming competitions organized by the Philippine Blind Sports Association.

In 2002, Krissy participated in a leadership seminar for the blind in Jahor Baru, Malaysia. "They made us understand that even when you are blind, you could be a leader not just to blind people but in any sector really."

"With my condition, I have to be inspired by myself, by my goal that I want to reach. You have to go out of your way to find opportunities for yourself. I earned a degree in college and what would I do with that if I don't seek out these opportunities?" Krissy said.

One of the external factors that inspired her, she said, was her fulfilling experience at ATRIEV where she also volunteered to

spearhead its personal development program. In her article on Krissy, Carol said she coordinated seminars and workshops on improving self-esteem for people with disabilities (PWDs) and for parents of PWDs or who themselves are visually impaired.

"I became more assertive with my stay at ATRIEV and learned how things are like when you are working when I became a part of the counseling group," Krissy fondly recalled.

In whatever she does, Krissy wants to be successful. Notwithstanding her blindness, she truly stands tall, more than literally, among both persons with disabilities and the so-called regular people.

"I promised to myself that no matter what happens I would find work in whatever type of environment. I don't want to be idle because I know I can do more in spite of my condition. If I would mind my condition, I won't move ahead and develop myself," she said. - With Carol Catacutan (training director of ATRIEV, or Adaptive Technology for Rehabilitation, Integration and Empowerment of the Visually Impaired).

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The First Filipino Totally Blind Computer Science Graduate



Julius Charles Serrano, a 22-year-old graduate of STI College Recto, earned the distinction of being the first totally blind Filipino computer science graduate. Blinded during his late teens due to congenital myopia, Serrano took the ATRIEV training in 2000 in preparation for his computer science course. As a regular STI student integrated with the sighted, Serrano participated and won in several programming contests, bagging the Best Programmer Award in 2004, among others.

During Serrano's thesis defense, Leo Mendoza, the lead panelist, did not believe Serrano himself prepared the program for his thesis on a digital library. He decided to give him a programming problem on the spot, which he was required to solve within the allotted time. Serrano, demonstrating the blind's use of Visual Basic as a programming language, came up with the required program well before his time expired. And to the panelist's amazement, his program was perfect.

On STI Recto's commencement exercises in May 2005, Serrano received the Manuel Villar Junior Award for exemplary students in the IT field. Only one other student, from STI Marikina, shared the honor with him. Last July, Serrano left for Hamburg, Germany to attend a two-week Job Access with Speech (JAWS) scripting course. Scripting is the process of making JAWS work

with various applications such as Yahoo! Messenger and Outlook Express, among others. Serrano is being trained to become one of the JAWS script specialists in Southeast Asia, assisting other organizations for the blind in the region.

- [First Batch \(October 2004 to the second week of February 2005\)](#)
- [Second Batch \(Third week of February to June 2005\)](#)
- [Third Batch \(July 2005 to 25 July 2006\)](#)
- [Fourth Batch \(25 July to 11 September 2006\)](#)

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