Social heritage of blindness to be uncovered

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The grant to the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) NI, was announced today. There are currently an estimated 52,000 people with sight loss in Northern Ireland but no comprehensive record of the experiences and heritage of the community exists. The HLF grant will be used to support a group of blind and partially sighted people as they carry out research to, and develop, a greater understanding of their own heritage from the early 19th century to the present day.

'A sense of the past' will explore themes such as the history of education, employment and legislation, from institutions such as the Ulster Society which established the first deaf and blind school in Belfast in 1836, to the introduction of legislation which paved the way for inclusion in social and leisure activities. It will also examine the development of statutory and voluntary sector services to support blind and partially sighted people including RNIB NI, the Blind Centre for NI and Guide Dogs for the Blind. Local inspirational figures, such as sportswoman Janet Gray, adventurer Mark Pollock and Victorian engineer Alexander Mitchell will also be highlighted.

The project will be steered by blind and partially sighted people to ensure their heritage is recorded accurately. The personal memories and experiences of local people will be recorded and used to produce a 'Talking Book', which will be distributed to blind and partially sighted people throughout Northern Ireland and the UK, and a printed publication for those working in the field of sight loss and the general public. A travelling exhibition will also be developed and displayed at selected libraries and museums across Northern Ireland to raise awareness of this heritage.

Commenting on the announcement, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: “This project will create the first permanent record of the history, achievements and contribution of blind and partially sighted people in NI, and we are delighted to be involved. In addition to helping blind and partially sighted people learn more about their heritage, the project will leave a lasting legacy through the production of the talking book, which will enable many more people to learn about this aspect of our local history.”

Welcoming the award, Barry Macaulay Senior Manager at RNIB NI added: "This is a really exciting project and we are very grateful to the HLF for recognising its value. As well as creating what should be a very interesting publication for all, we will be using the project to give blind and partially sighted people the opportunity to actively engage in the field of heritage and to raise awareness and improve the accessibility of museums and other arts and culture exhibitions for those with little or no sight."

Further information

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