



AFB Award winner sheds light on digital accessibility for disabilities

By Elaine Cohen

When Jennison Asuncion accepts the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) 2018 Stephen Garff Marriott Award this spring, he will be in California. However, Asuncion is bound to reflect on his roots in Montreal.

"I became blind as an infant as a result of optic atrophy," Asuncion said, noting he is a proud white cane user. "My success and outlook wouldn't be possible without my mother and sister's support. Technology was just evolving in the '70s." He studied Braille at the Montreal Association for the Blind, played with a Commodore and his family read back what was on the screen. Asuncion

handed in assignments using a manual typewriter at Elizabeth Ballantyne Elementary School. His computer technology would evolve through his days at Loyola High School.

At Dawson CEGEP, Asuncion met students with diverse disabilities and witnessed the power of technology for them. After graduating from Concordia with a B.A. in political science and a M.A. in Educational Technology, he honed his mettle at IBM and BMO. "I relocated to Toronto, while finishing my Master's but my daytime employment wasn't focused on digital accessibility." After a good run, he stepped back and contemplated his passion before veering into digital accessibility.

In 2006, he joined RBC's IT accessibility team, working with designers, developers, external vendors and others to meet the bank's accessibility standards. In 2013, he relocated to Silicon Valley to take on directing LinkedIn's digital accessibility efforts. "In part, I manage a team of engineers who work with designers, engineers, and others so that our web and mobile apps can be used by everyone. LinkedIn helps professionals con-

nect so that they can be productive and successful."

Asuncion volunteers with non-profit organizations and spearheads events on digital inclusion. He has been co-directing the Dawson College-based Adaptech Research Network since 1999, which examines how IT impacts Canadian college and university students with disabilities. In 2012, he received the prestigious Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. The upcoming AFB Award honours a visually impaired individual, who is an exceptional mentor and a remarkable achiever.

Although Asuncion takes pride in every endeavor, he is especially proud of co-founding Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD) in 2012. "It's held annually the third Thursday in May and we ask people to spend time learning about digital access and inclusion," Asuncion said, adding the idea emanated from Los Angeles-based web developer Joe Devon's blog. "We connected and discovered we're both from Montreal. GAAD began with events in 10 to 12 cities and now it's



Jennison Asuncion specializes in digital accessibility for people with disabilities. (Photo, Jennison Asuncion)

taken on a life of its own. Events vary and target the tech community but are open to everyone."

Students with disabilities need their parents and others to give them latitude to explore their own career aspirations, he relates. "If they make a mistake, then they'll realize it's not for them like anyone else."

