



Andreas Heinecke, social entrepreneur, is determined to bridge the gap of the social divide.

At the National Science Fair, a group of chattering children stood in front of a medium-sized black box titled "Dialogue in the Dark". They looked very excited as if they were going to hop on an adrenaline-inducing ride in an amusement park. Some even asked if there were ghosts who would scare them.

Each group, of five or six children, were given a brief orientation, and were given a walking cane and told how to use it.

Then, the adventure in absolute darkness began.

At the exit, at the other end of the box, a group of high school students cheered and jeered.

"Wow! I didn't realise that you are blind," said a girl to the guide of the exhibition. "You are so capable and kind. Thank you very much for leading us through this experience," she added. The young blind guide smiled meekly.

They took pictures together, smiled, hugged, held hands and exchanged good wishes.

In a society where blind people are usually put out of sight, "Dialogue in the Dark" brings them back into the light.

This specially-designed, experiential exhibition offers a unique platform where the able and disabled interact, communicate and learn about each other.

"I've never been in contact with blind people before. They amaze me," said Suwimol, a high school pupil. "Blind or sighted, we are no different. The only difference is that one can see when there's light, while the other can see in darkness. That's all," she said, with a broad smile.

Another pupil added; "I've realised how hard life is for them in society. The fact that they can get through a rough environment gains my respect. They are really able people."

Many write in the visiting books how the exhibition taught them to appreciate their sight and other sensory organs, which get stronger in the dark.

"The idea is to integrate people and educate society in an entertaining way," said Daniela Dimitrova, international masterguide of "Dialogue in the Dark" (DID). "DID takes people from fear to fun and then the result is an insight," she said.

Sometimes, people understand the world better when it is dark, she said. "Darkness is an equaliser. It makes us the same, no matter what race, religion, nationality, gender, age or profession we are. In the dark, none of that matters," said Dimitrova.

"It is our attitude and personality towards people and things that matter," she added.

Since its opening at Bitec as part of the National Science Fair, DID has seen an average of 650 visitors each day.

The exhibition has been to 130 cities in 19 countries, and Thailand is the first Asian country that this unique exhibition comes to.

An enlightening experience, "Dialogue in the Dark", is the brainchild of German social entrepreneur Andreas Heinecke, who was determined to find new ways to bridge the gap across human divides through direct human experience.

And the idea is quite simple — to put oneself in another's shoes.

"We darken rooms, design them scenically and invite sighted people to be led through by blind people," Heinecke, 53, explained his idea. "In the dark, the sighted are suddenly blind, while the blind people who are used to moving without seeing become the sighted ones.

"This role swap makes us think about our prejudices and stereotypes," said Heinecke. "We will get a chance to see ourselves and each other anew, blind or otherwise."

In Thailand, the exhibition features just a few installations and the tour takes only 20 minutes. However, from January, the National Science Museum will place a permanent full-scale DID exhibition at Chamchuri Square for a year. The entire tour at this exhibition takes

DIALOGUE IN THE DARK

Making its debut in Asia, an exhibition that provides a meeting ground for the visually impaired and people with vision

Story by **KARNJARIYA SUKRUNG**
 Photos by **SOMKID CHAJITVANIT**

about 1½ hours, and features additional settings and activities.

At Bitec, Heinecke introduces three concepts to visitors: Nature, city life and a place where we can interact in social activities.

Heinecke does not only aim to educate society about the potentials of being disabled, but also wishes to create job opportunities for the blind wherever the exhibition goes.

DID employs blind, mute and deaf people, and this has generated jobs for as many as 4,000 blind people across the world. Among these blind guides, 40 per cent are employed after the exhibition goes on display.

Dimitrova trains the local staff, instructing them on how to guide the tour and communicate with visitors.

The Bulgarian masterguide trained 19 Thai guides for this exhibition. "They are really smart, learn things fast and do the job very well," she said.

Yet, the most difficult task in training blind guides, said Dimitrova, is boosting their confidence.

"They have long been isolated from society. They are kept in special schools, workplaces and associate only with their peers, so they are not confident about themselves and in dealing with people with vision."

Social support is a good act, but what blind and other disabled people need the most is self-esteem.

"People need to function and feel they are meaningful and worthy. I want to earn some money and buy my cane and use my cane to work," said Dimitrova.

Sirinart Siriwan, 26, is one of the Thai guides. She lost her sight in a car accident at the age of 18.

"I'm glad to know that I am worthy of something, that I can work and earn a living for myself," said Sirinart, a 5th year university student in special education.

Jobs for the blind are still limited, particularly in Thailand, commented Sirinart. "What is the point in having a good education when most of the jobs available for us are selling lottery tickets or being telephone operators? We want more options and we can do more if society gives us a chance."

According to the Thailand Association of the Blind, there are more than 600,000 blind people in Thailand, 90 per cent of whom lack basic educational and career opportunities.

"Self-confidence comes with opportunity. If society gives us more opportunity, we will show more potential," Sirinart said.

As a social entrepreneur, Heinecke has found his niche — marginalised people and social prejudices.

He learned that 610 million people are dis-

abled worldwide. And they are deprived of opportunities and understanding, hindered by stereotypes, fears, avoidance and prejudices.

The idea to work for the blind was fostered in the 1970s when Heinecke, then a journalist and documentarist at a German radio station, had to work with a young blind colleague who returned to work after losing his sight in an accident.

"Like many people, I didn't know what to do or how to communicate with him. But after a while, I realised that strength could be drawn even from a serious disability," he said. "My sympathy was misplaced."

Later he switched jobs to work with the Frankfurt Association for the Blind and developed many devices and tools to ensure that blind people have a full life. His work included an electronic newspaper, digital reference books and establishing a database with job announcements, for instance.

The idea of "Dialogue in the Dark" came when the lights went out at his workplace and his blind colleague taught him how to get around in the dark. "I told myself, 'This is it,'" said Heinecke.

The exhibition was first launched in Frankfurt in 1988, and has since travelled around the world. There have been over four million people around the globe whose perception and thinking has changed after experiencing the exhibition.

"This is really a satisfying job," said Heinecke. A doctor in philosophy, Heinecke's work surprises visitors with their own ideas of reality and brings them face-to-face with their prejudices and perceptions about themselves and others.

"In 'Dialogue in the Dark', what we see as

reality suddenly becomes relative," he said.

Unlike business entrepreneurs, Heinecke set his goal for a social cause. "Profits," he said, "are the perception of the beholder."

"I think this project can help people overcome their disadvantages and find work. That is also another meaning of profit," he said. Yet, DID does earn a substantial revenue. It is sold as a concept on a license basis.

Aside from "Dialogue in the Dark", Heinecke is developing another platform, called "Scenes of Silence", to bring people into the world of silence — where the deaf and mute teach people about communication.

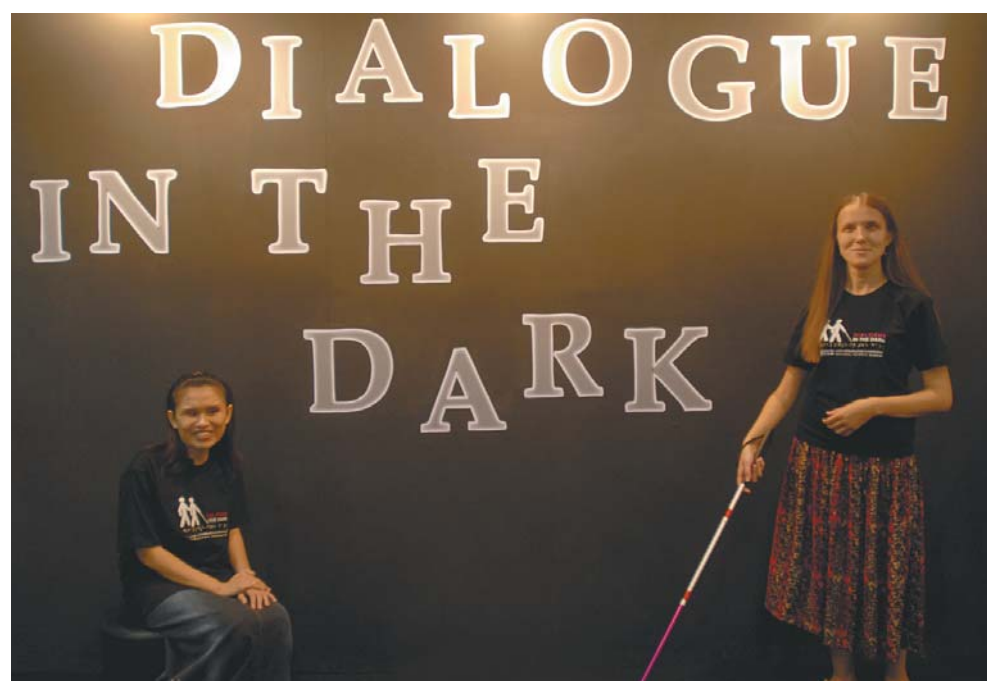
Further plans include creating the experience of old age, migration, exile and crime and punishment.

His interest in working with marginalised people and social prejudices may have come from his own family background.

Heinecke's family is of Jewish and German descent. He was upset when he learned that a few members of his family were victims of the Holocaust, while others were Nazi supporters.

From an early age, he has tried to understand why people marginalised others and on what grounds do we judge people and feel inferior or superior.

After creating DID and researching future exhibitions, Heinecke has learned that the answers are tolerance, open dialogue and exchange.



Master guide Daniela Dimitrova (right) trains Sirinart Siriwan on how to guide the way in a dark world.