Opening speech, Gilles Morbey

Dbl President and CEO Sense International

'Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light' – Helen Keller

Welcome to the 16th Dbl World conference, hosted by Sense International Romania.

It's wonderful to be in Bucharest. Cristiana Salomie noted in her early introduction to the conference that Bucharest is known as Little Paris. I know we have all been welcomed and I hope we can repay that hospitality in some small way. No doubt we will enjoy the many places of interest and local attractions.

We will also be publicising the conference widely through DbI Facebook and DbI Review. More of our international colleagues throughout the many countries that we represent will learn that Bucharest has been the Centre of Excellence for Deafblindness this week.

Indeed I have had best wishes from people around the world, including Akhil Paul from Sense International India who couldn't be with us. Akhil wishes you the best for this conference and reminded me of this Helen Keller quote:

"Once I knew only darkness and stillness. My life was without past or future. But a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness and my heart leaped to the rapture of living".

I understand that Romanian legend has it that the city of Bucharest took its name from a shepherd named Bucur. His flute playing reportedly dazzled people and endeared him to the local traders, who then gave his name to Bucharest. I also understand that Bucur translated means 'joy'. So perhaps our conference should be about joy.

Indeed we have much to celebrate. Tony Best, Chair of the Conference Scientific Committee reminds us of the struggle that we had (and still have) to get deafblindness recognised; but despite the difficulties reaching this objective, we are steadily achieving success. Through efforts that began some decades ago, we are pleased that the disciplines of teaching and supporting children and adults who are deafblind has become professionalised.

Within this over-arching professional umbrella, one of the questions we keep asking is: "are we now grown up sufficiently to let go a bit; to support doing things differently, responding to local needs and cultures". We also know that being deafblind shouldn't and doesn't define us. A friend and colleague at the Acquired Deafblindness Network (ADBN) Conference last November in Belfast spoke of being

an artist, mother, grandmother and then she reminded us: "Oh, I forgot I'm also deafblind".

We need that supportive base and that over-arching professional umbrella. We have worked long and hard to achieve this recognition and understanding but at the end of the day if we can't respond and adapt to the needs of the people we support (whatever their circumstances) we haven't finished our work. So while we must have the high aspiration of professionalism and rigour we must also be flexible and responsive to local circumstances and individual needs. This is a tall order!

As President of DbI, I see countries and programmes all at different levels of understanding and development. Yet we have this bond that brings us together at our conferences and events. The Italian Deafblind organisation's Lega Del Filo d'Oro, describes this as a golden thread that connects all of us.

And these connections run deep. Sometimes we don't appreciate that, but if we are lucky we meet people every two years or so then pick up those discussions and friendships immediately. We should appreciate that this is not the same in other professions!

Part of that golden thread is both joyous and deeply sad. We have friends in Nepal where teachers and pupils alike have suffered greatly from the two recent earthquakes; we have children in Bangladesh where unrest has led to huge challenges in keeping their programmes going.

So our deliberations here in Bucharest must be searching and aspirational; but they must be practical as well. What we discuss here must and will make a difference.

I am also CEO of Sense International and have known Cristiana Salomie (Director of Sense International Romania) for many years. Here in Romania, Cristiana and her team have made a difference, starting with early identification, early intervention, through to education. The deafblind curriculum has been adapted to suit national Romanian standards with huge contributions from the Ministry of Education and support from the Ministry of Public Health; together all having made a difference. SI Romania supports the screening of 80,000 babies, has trained 150 teachers and supports 800 children and families throughout the country

The next steps are just as challenging here in Romania (as elsewhere) as our children move to adulthood, seek vocational training and employment. Seeking support for life is never easy but we must find a way. I'm pleased to tell you that SI Romania has made a great start in this regard by opening 5 vocational centres with 2 more on the way.

So we look forward to a conference that keeps our goals high with our feet on the ground. Certainly I can see that the thoughtful presentations will encourage

discussion; knowing many of you as delegates, you will not fail to reflect, learn and no doubt challenge.

So finally welcome indeed to our 16th Dbl World conference. I know you will have a wonderful time in Joyous Bucharest. Learn, absorb and take the ideas home to your own countries where as the wonderful delegates you are, you will take another step towards making a difference for a child, a family and a deafblind friend.

Gill Morbey Bucharest Romania, May 26, 2015.