



All photos: Margarita Melendez

# Literary Listening

Local association brings literature to the visually impaired

On one of the most sweltering days of the summer, the playground outside the Susquehanna Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (SABVI) is empty. The swings and merry-go-round remain perfectly still without the disturbance of playing children or even a summer breeze. The hands on the large clock, with its smiling face and Braille numbers, are untouched. Inside the building, however, it is comfortably cool. The sky-high ceilings and expansive rooms betray the building's former life as a feed mill, part of Lancaster's rich agricultural legacy.

SABVI begins working with a client as soon as a diagnosis confirming a vision disability is made, often in early childhood. From the time they are very young, blind and visually impaired children learn how to use an abacus, read Braille text, and perform other life skills. They mingle with "non-special needs" children so that they can learn what it is like to be part of a world in which most other people can see, and so that they do not feel alienated or stigmatized by their impairment. The interaction also teaches seeing children how to be sensitive to other children who are "different."

SABVI's services to the blind and visually impaired of Lancaster and Lebanon Counties continue through adulthood, and are numerous and varied. One of the organization's strongest components relates to literacy, with a Radio Information Network and a lending library. Seated in the library, which is little more than a long wooden table surrounded by several

bookshelves, four of SABVI's program directors recount the origin of the institution.

"[The lending library] got started on a very small scale, with about 20 or 25 descriptive videotapes," says Kay Masci, SABVI's Vice-President of Rehabilitation and Education. The rest of the group lists the first films carried by SABVI's library — *Dumbo*, *True Lies*, *Roman Holiday*, *Sister Act II* — which were donated by Blockbuster. "Usually a person watching a movie can see a character walking across the room, see their body language, but a person who's visually impaired can't get that information," Masci adds. "The VHS tapes actually describe it for you."

While the descriptive films are popular with SABVI's clients, audiobooks, or books-on-tape, have proved to be the real bread and butter of the lending library. Individual donations of books-on-tape started flooding in. A group of Boy Scouts from Leola sponsored an audiobook drive for SABVI. They set a goal of 100 audiobooks, but collected close to four times that amount.

"We had 700 [audio]books at one point," says Masci. "We now have extra books that we haven't been able to catalog." She and her co-workers chuckle and shake their heads, as she gestures to two large, haphazardly arranged stacks of audiobooks in one corner of the library. According to Masci, any duplicate books are put into the Lebanon County Library System, to make them more conveniently accessible to clients in the Lebanon area who might not be able to travel to Lancaster easily, and because the tiny library simply cannot hold more than one copy of each title.

The association's lending library functions similarly to regular libraries, despite its diminutive size. The perimeter of the library is marked by a wall of bookshelves, and occupies just one corner of the SABVI building. Clients check out audiobooks just as if they were checking out the bound version of *The Great Gatsby*, and can keep the books for three to four weeks. SABVI's circulation desk is actually little more than a sign-out sheet attached to a clipboard. One only need look at all the empty spaces on the shelves, however, to understand how popular and appreciated the lending library is to Central Pennsylvania's visually impaired.

BY STEPHANIE ANDERSON

Most of us take the ability to see for granted. Save the occasional bumped knee during a dark midnight trip to the bathroom, we use our vision to maneuver with relative ease. Even those of us with less than perfect vision can be aided by glasses or contact lenses — even surgery. We wake up each morning and go about our daily routine without as much as a thought about what our lives would be like if we suddenly lost our vision. We seldom think of how even the most mundane of tasks — making a pot of coffee, driving to meet friends for dinner, threading a needle to sew a button onto a blouse — would be rendered more difficult, or altogether impossible, if we could not see.

Most of us also take the ability to read for granted, particularly casual reading; things like phone books, menus, traffic signs, newspapers and instructions for medications. We hardly remember what it was like as pre-readers, at a time when the majority of us acquired these skills by listening to parents and teachers reading. Before we could recognize words in tangles of letters, we listened as others shared stories from books. Now, years beyond the mystery of decoding words, we seldom pay tribute to all the moments, large and small, when our lives are enhanced by reading. But for those who are blind or struggling with visual impairment, this luxury of reading is never taken for granted. For them, literacy means something very different.

Their work has made a difference, even in the most unlikely of places. According to Masci, many of the local visually impaired Amish residents now use generators to power tape players so that they may borrow and listen to audiobooks. "We don't have to go through inquisitions with Amish bishops anymore," she says. "They see us as offering valuable services."

The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. contains the nation's largest collection of audiobooks. Until the lending library opened, the Library of Congress was one of the only places for Central PA residents to check out audiobooks. Kay Masci compliments the Library of Congress's collection, but adds, "They can go to the Library of Congress, but [our lending library] is more convenient. Lots of books are checked out, and they have to be put on a waiting list. We can just go to a store and buy a book; there's no waiting or red tape."

**T**im Ditlow recalls his father listening to audiobooks he'd borrowed from the Library of Congress. Ditlow's father, Anthony, was a literature professor who lost his sight to optic neuritis, a condition in which the optic nerve, which is responsible for sending visual data to the brain, becomes inflamed. Though he lost his vision, he never lost his passion for books. He could no longer read in the way that he had before, but listening to audiobooks became a sufficient replacement — so much so that he decided to create the Listening Library in New York City in the late 1970s. The Listening Library focused solely on audiobooks, and was one of the first three commercial companies of its kind in the United States.



"Many of the early narrators [for Listening Library audiobooks] in New York City were also readers for the American Association for the Blind," Ditlow says during a phone interview.

"My father heard voices from the Library of Congress audiobooks and hired some of them to record audiobooks for the Listening Library." Ditlow has since taken over his father's responsibilities as publisher of the Listening Library. The business is now a subsidiary of Random House and produces more than 100 unabridged children's titles each year.

Though they may seem like a new phenomenon, audiobooks have actually been in existence since the 1930s, according to Ditlow. Great audiobook readers recall the old radio days when families gathered around their radios instead of their televisions for entertainment. Ditlow admits that while poetry and the works of William

Shakespeare were written to be read aloud, not every book lends itself to an audio reincarnation. "It all depends on the reader," Ditlow says. "A great reader will enhance an experience. Casting is very important. I'm a minimalist, and believe in the power of the straight voice."

Some modern books seem to have been tailor-made for audiobooks. Ditlow cites the *Harry Potter* series, which is read exclusively by Jim Dale, who performs 134 different voices — a feat recognized in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. "The dialogue in *Harry Potter* really lends itself to that," Ditlow says. "Other stories are more quiet or told in the first-person, so that wouldn't really work for them."

While Ditlow focuses on young listeners throughout the conversation, the benefits of reading and listening extend to all



(Above) The clock on the playground outside the Susquehanna Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired has Braille numbers on its face.

(Left) This man works behind the scenes at SABVI's Radio Information Network. Volunteers read book excerpts and newspaper articles on the air to blind and visually impaired listeners.

ages — particularly to the visually impaired, whose only other literary option may be Braille. While Braille texts certainly are necessary and beneficial, books written in Braille are often downright unwieldy and impractical. One standard printed page equals two pages in Braille, resulting in a book twice as big. The lending library at SABVI, for instance, contains only a limited number of Braille titles, including *A Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens, *Goodbye Mr. Chips* by Hilton and the New Testament. *A Tale of Two Cities* in Braille is seven volumes and takes up nearly three-quarters of a shelf; the New Testament is 18 volumes, with double-sided pages. "It's just massive," says Masci. "You just can't have a Braille Bible at home. But you can get it on tape."

Audiobooks may have an unfortunate stigma as being an "easy" alternative to reading, but Ditlow believes this idea is a product of misinformation. The legions of supportive teachers, school administrators, librarians and education experts who support the audiobook movement attest to this, as well. "Listening is a skill set now being taught," Ditlow explains. By listening to stories read aloud, he adds, children learn correct word pronunciation and are exposed to more than 1,000 new words that they most likely would not hear otherwise.

"I don't advocate that kids should stop reading, but the biggest listeners, it turns out, are also the biggest readers," he says. "Many kids get carsick when they try to read in the car, and the average TV is on five to six hours a day at home. I encourage parents... instead of turning on the TV, pop in an audiobook. Parents find that they enjoy listening, too."

According to Ditlow, children can listen up to two full grade

(Above) A visually impaired woman is assisted with using a computer program. SABVI helps the visually impaired in all aspects of life, especially reading.

(Right) SABVI's lending library features a few Braille books. However, audiobooks are more popular, keeping the visually impaired up-to-date with modern literature.

levels ahead of their reading levels, which is positive news. He explains that people use the same part of the brain when they listen to audiobooks as when they read — an active skill set referred to as "inner picture making." Watching television and playing video games, by comparison, are categorized as passive skill sets.

Ditlow adds again that he never wants audiobooks to replace the real thing; the sensual experience of reading — the feel of the paper between fingers, the smell of the ink — cannot be duplicated. But there are real benefits to listening to audiobooks, especially for children who might not enjoy reading or have enough time for it.

Times have changed since the days of his father's clunky audiobook player. Audiobooks are more popular and accessible than ever between MP3

players, iPods and new digital recordings. And audiobooks are released simultaneously with their paper counterparts.

The simultaneous releases also aid visually impaired persons who rely on audiobooks for entertainment. The fact that they could be listening to an immensely popular book that everyone's talking about, such as *The Da Vinci Code* or the latest in the *Harry Potter* series, keeps them connected to the outside world. Helping the visually impaired achieve individual independence while still feeling a part of the rest of society is one of the most important goals of SABVI and similar organizations.

SABVI's motto, in fact, clearly illustrates its mission: "Independence Is Our Vision." Joanne Martin, the organization's Director of Development, says that listening to audiobooks is "one way to ensure clients are part of society and included in the community instead of being a recluse."



After the meeting in the lending library at SABVI, station manager Dwight Smith gives a tour of SABVI's Radio Information Network. The radio station (located on the other side of the industrial division, which employs mostly visually impaired workers to sew and perform other duties) is little more than a small hallway with a few offices and recording booths. A plaque honoring WLAN-FM founder Frank H. Altdoerffer hangs on the wall outside Smith's office. Altdoerffer helped found the Radio Information Network more than 30 years ago. According to Smith, he believed in SABVI's commitment to providing literacy and other aid for its clients.

The Radio Information Network is not your typical radio station, though it has all the same equipment, from the reel-to-reel machines to the lit on-air sign. During the week, volunteers read books aloud on the air for an hour, picking up where they left off the next day. The station primarily chooses books about the visually impaired, or books by local authors about local issues. In the late afternoons, other readers read from local and national newspapers so that listeners can stay up-to-date on current events, community happenings, births, deaths, marriages and other information.

The radio programs are not accessible by turning the dial on your car or home radio. The station uses the FM service of the local cable provider, so listeners must have a cable hook-up connected to their radios. But those who can hear the programs find them invaluable. "You can wake up, sit and read the local paper. Someone who's visually impaired can't do that," says Smith.

Walking down the small corridor from the radio station through the industrial division abuzz with the whirl of machinery, dozens of women sit behind sewing machines piecing together swaths of camouflage fabric to make Army Combat Uniforms. In such a modern scene, the old, brick walls are the only remnant of the building's past. But it is fitting, as Kay Masci, Dwight Smith and the other employees of the Susquehanna Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired spend their days working to bridge the gap between the seeing and the sightless, and the vast cultural and economic spaces in between.

"I think our agency is a melting pot. We serve from birth to death. The interesting thing about blindness is that it doesn't target a certain age or ethnicity," adds Joan Martin. "There are different beliefs and theologies, and some groups reach out less and want to take care of their own. We're breaking down those beliefs when people have a good experience here."

