Brailleists Serve Blind Community's Reading Needs

By Katharina Parrath
Times-Gebe

MADISON—To lovingly paraphrase Margaret Mitchell, never underestimate the power of a small group of passionate people to change the world for the better. In that case, the dozen or so committed local men and women who transcribe braille into braille for blind and visually impaired people. And in so doing, aid sighted people, as well.

The Madison-area non-profit Braille Library & Transcribing Services (BLTS), which began nearly 50 years ago, has transcribed thousands of pages of fiction, non-fiction, cooking, craft, and children’s books, as well as other text, said president, library coordinator, and transcriber volunteer Patricia Herring.

“Instruction manuals, tax forms, restaurant menus, you name it,” said Sue Nelson, one of four transcribers from Middleton, also known as “Brail- lists,” and the organization’s treasurer.

By running a volunteer, with a shoestring part-time staff of two, the service provides transcribers by request, transcribing for sighted people and a braille lending library for anyone in North America. Donations and nominal fees, for transcribing text, fund the organization.

The library, utilized by individuals and schools, contains over 2,000 works, from John Grisham’s “The Pelican Brief,” which comes in four large volumes of embossed braille, to Dr. Seuss’s “Green Eggs and Ham.” Not all blind people can read and write braille, which is problematic for employment, leisure and simply living in a sighted world, the women said.

Braille allows people to label their possessions, such as “blue blouse,” “gray slacks,” or “toilet soap,” explained Rajeed. “Many blind people aren’t employed,” said Herring.

“These who are, are overwhelmingly braille literate. Even in a world with audio books and screen readers, braille books broaden and expand experiences, giving the opportunity to read for better understanding, from the voices of characters in one’s imagination and simply hold books, like anyone else, they said.

Braille is named for Louis Braille, a Frenchman who lost his sight in an accident as a schoolboy. After a French military officer gave the young man’s written “night code” to a school for the blind, thinking it might be useful there, Braille’s “imagination was fired,” said Rajeed. Braille’s code, which is still used today, was his code for music.

However, not much happened in the United States, with Braille’s new code for blind people, even after soldiers from WWI returned home blinded by mustard gas. But after WWII, many more veterans returned home and Congress decided to act— it would be a savings to the government if blind vision could read and be productive members of society, explained Rajeed.

Washington DC sent representatives around the states to encourage braille training and printing, which would involve a special machine, called an “embosser.” Rajeed recalled a time in the 1970s, when a man from DC came to Madison to launch a group—however, braille transcribing already existed there, she said.

The women commented that even if people think they don’t recognize braille, anyone who has noticed the series of dots on an elevator panel has seen it. What appears to be a backward letter “L,” they said, is actually the marker indicating the next symbol in a number.

A lot has changed with technology since the 1940s, and now brailleists use a regular keyboard and computer at home to transcribe, going top to bottom, left to right, as with any English book. Then text is sent to certified braille proof readers, and finally, sent through the extremely loud embossing machine in the office, they said, which raises the dots on a blind person can read by using the touch of a finger.

Braille transcription significantly benefits others, they said, directly addressing critical needs in literacy, employment and enjoyment of leisure. Over the years BLTS has trained about 200 sighted people to transcribe print into braille, and last year the lending library sent out 2,036 in total to 180 readers, nearly 1000 in children.

“The next season of 40 weeks of transcribing training will open up if anyone is interested,” said Herring.

Katharina Parrath-Times-Gebe

Above: Standing in front of one row of the 2,000-braille book in the lending library, Patricia Herring holds the first of four braille volumes of John Grisham’s “The Pelican Brief.” Middlesex resident and brailist Sue Nelson, and Connie Rajeed, holding the braille version of Dr. Seuss’s “Green Eggs and Ham.” Below: A braille transcriber test text at home, using any computer and keyboard. Braille is a code that has only six dots to communicate and requires nearly a year of training to become proficient.

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RTHH to Hold First Fundraiser for Transplant Families

MIDDLETOWN—Rebuilding Hope Transplant House (RTHH) is hosting their first Family Reunion on Sept. 8 at Capital Brewery in Middletown from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

RTHH has served as a home away from home to transplant families in search of a second chance at life through the miracle of transplantation since 2013. Guests from all parts of Wisconsin, 41 different states and eight countries have called Rebuilding Hope Transplant House their home.

The life-changing relationships built while sharing a supportive home with other families going through very similar journeys is what truly makes Rebuilding Hope Transplant House such a special place for so many. These lifelong friendships, unforgettable moments, weekly memories and memories of dear people we have lost over the years inspires us to bring this special event together.

There will be live music, silent auctions, 50/50 raffles, lunch, group walk to show the faces of transplant, family pictures and more. The event is $10 per person and includes activities, food and a t-shirt.

Ironman to Pedal Through Cross Plains

MADISON—The annual IRONMAN Wisconsin marathons is gearing up for its 6th staging in downtown Madison.

The race starts at 6:40 a.m. with swimming a 1.2-mile lap at Monona Terrace, then participants will hop on their bikes and ride 112 miles in two-loops through Dane County, including through the Village of Cross Plains. The race concludes with a 26.2-mile, two-loop run through the streets of Madison.

Athletic events begin on Sept. 5 with check-ins and briefings. Closing ceremonies and award presentations will be held on Sept. 9. Nearly 2,500 people have signed up for the event, which includes categories for men and women age 18-74, plus a physically challenged open division. For more information, or to register, visit ironman.com and search Wisconsin.

Letters

JA Benefits Kids, Community
Letter to the Editor:
Our Junior Achievement team values the past support we’ve received as we served area youth during the past school year. Thank you to all 600+ of you for your engagement while you learned to make personal finance, career readiness, and entrepreneurial choices. We’re here to help you become tomorrow’s leaders.

Thank you teachers from 106 classrooms in 65 schools—where Junior Achievement lessons were taught. It’s a privilege spending time with your students. We’re here to help you grow tomorrow’s leaders.

Thank you volunteers — 239 of you — for delivering 33,501 instructional Contact Hours to students in Dane, Dodge, Iowa, Jefferson, and St Sauveur Counties. We’re here to help you inspire tomorrow’s leaders.

Thank you business leaders — 112 companies who made donations and encouraged your employees to volunteer. We’re here to help you develop tomorrow’s leaders.

Our 2019-20 school year is at hand, reaching 6,100 students. We’ll accomplish that goal with your continued support. If you’d like to volunteer or donate, “Get Involved” at JAwisconsin.org.

Randi Danielson, Betty Braggquist, Troy Mitchell, and Jeff Wagner, on behalf of Junior Achievement Dane Area Board of Directors

Carbon Goals Not Met with Expansion
Dear Editor,

The City of Middletown is currently under a master planning process to create a blueprint for future development at the airport. One of the things the city would like to do is expand its primary runway from 8000 to 9000 feet (a 25 percent increase). This would allow bigger private jets to take off and land at the airport. Yet, recently, the City of Middletown pledged to reduce its carbon footprint, and even approved the installation of a solar array at the airport which is a step in the right direction.

Given all this, one would think the city would be doing everything in its power to reduce, not increase, private plane usage at its municipal airport. After all, private planes are considerably less efficient than commercial planes, and the personal carbon footprint of passengers who travel this way is much higher. Some estimates peg private jet travel at one tenth of carbon footprint per passenger mile, even after accounting for travel. However, such data vary depending on the mode of aircraft and mode of travel under the same conditions and are no more than estimates.

For this reason and many others, area residents (including me) are opposed to any expansion of the primary runway. It would be nice if the city surveyed the people most affected by airport operations at the same time it surveyed those who use it (or may potentially use the airport). The city has done the latter, but does not intend to do the former until AFTER the master planning process is completed. That is a shame.

Leona Sparky, Town of Springfield

Create Airport Citizen Committee Now
Letter to the Editor:
The City of Middletown should create a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) recommended Citizen Advisory Committee right now, particularly for only owned Middletown Municipal Airport! Money Field where there is widespread citizen interest is whether or not the city proceeds with significant airport expansion plans.

All further expansion-related activity should be halted and until the city create an Airport Citizen Advisory Committee to provide meaningful citizen input from those affected in residential neighborhoods in the City of Middletown, Town of Middletown, and Town of Springfield.

The City of Middletown Common Council appears to be so eager to push this aggressive Money Field expansion plan through to completion that it intentionally skipped this critical Citizen’s Committee first-stop specifically recommended by the FAA. In read, the Common Council started with the assumption that they already have the votes needed to approve an aggressive expansion of Middletown Municipal Airport and moved to the FAA’s recommend second-step, the 2016 Technical Airport Advisory Committee (TRAC’s) City of Middletown “Airport Master Plan Advisory Committee” or “AMAPC”.

The AMAPC has only been allowed to consider agenda items that deal with technical airport expansion-related details. Such discussions are led by the city’s high-priced engineering consultant, Mead & Hunt, and are not primarily intended for complete public understanding or comprehension of such technical details. They may be appropriate for a technical detail committee to include city members with a conflict-of-interest as they may be more knowledgeable than many others with respect to such matters. However, citizen comment on technical details prior to the Citizen’s Committee on whether or not they should consider airport expansion at all in a classic way before the home scenario. This is an extremely flawed approach and is not open, honest, and transparent governance.

A proposed expansion of Middletown Municipal Airport raises many serious questions of land use sustainability, and before any technical aspects are considered, there must be a Citizen’s Committee of members without financial conflicts-of-interest created to consider all of these issues.

Cynthia Richard, Middletown


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