



# On-Site Newsletter

Audio & Braille Literacy Enhancement, Inc.  
Providing alternative ways for people with print disabilities to read

Fall 2016

## At ABLE, It's a Family Affair!

Brailled school materials needed for academic success and audio books for children and adults are crucial aspects of the work ABLE does. We accomplish this work through the passion and dedication of a small staff and an amazing group of volunteers. Steve and Laurie Heesen and their children are very much a part of the heart of what ABLE does.

Laurie Heesen became an audio volunteer earlier this year and reads in our new state-of-the-art ABLE Sound Center. The first book she read, *100 Things Packers Fans Should Know & Do Before They Die*, has been made available to over 550,000 blind or physically handicapped individuals all over the country through our collaboration with the Wisconsin Talking Book and Braille Library (WTBBL). More than thirty patrons have already requested and received the book. Jim Wiskow, a life-long avid Packer fan, was so impressed with Laurie Heesen's recording that he gave us a call to let us know what a great job she has done reading this book. Laurie is also taking the course in braille transcription to become a volunteer braille transcriber for us!



*Laurie Heesen recording in the ABLE Sound Center*

Laurie's husband, Steve, is a volunteer for ABLE as well. Steve, who happens to be blind, helps with our annual Braille Games event, co-sponsored by ABLE, WTBBL and Vision Forward. Industries for the Blind, Steve's employer and one of ABLE's generous funders, supports Steve's participation every year for the Braille Games event. Laurie and Steve's son, Josiah, is an avid braille reader and an enthusiastic participant in Braille Games. Josiah also receives braille materials from ABLE while being home schooled by Laurie. Steve receives braille material from ABLE for classes he attends through his church.



*Back row: Laurie holding Selah, Steve  
Front row, left to right: AJ, Jenna, Matthew, Josiah*

The Heesen family is a great example of a family that "pays it forward!" Not only do they deeply appreciate the materials that ABLE produces but they generously give of their time and energy. We at ABLE look forward to brailling the assignments that will be needed by their younger child, Matthew, when he starts reading braille.

## ABLE: Growing by Leaps & Bounds! Reflections of Cheryl Orgas, Executive Director

Nearly ten years ago, I walked through the doors of Volunteer Services for the Visually Handicapped (VSVH) as the new executive director. I knew the mission of VSVH well because I was one of the blind students benefiting from their services in the 60s when the organization began.

Much has changed in the last ten years! We have grown from three staff in one big, open room to a team of eight working in partitioned space that supports the focus needed for our greatly increased production. Our dedicated volunteers, without whom this growth wouldn't have been possible, now number eighty. And that's not counting our amazing board of directors who have helped lead us bravely to where we are today.

During our first forty years we produced a wide range of material in braille and audio formats for blind and visually impaired individuals locally and throughout the country. However, we knew there were many needs still not being met. Our outreach had to grow, and *we* had to grow and change to meet those needs.

By 2008 we realized some dreams. In addition to remodeling our space, we upgraded to a system that could handle many more computers, complete with a complex back up system and dedicated file server. We changed our name from Volunteer Services for the Visually Handicapped to Audio & Braille Literacy Enhancement to better reflect our mission. And, we updated our look with a grand new logo to reflect our new name.

In the audio department we dramatically shifted production to soar into the digital age, helping our

volunteers make the switch from analog recording on cassettes to digital recording, now done in our state-of-the-art ABLE Sound Center. This exponentially increases the number of people across the country who can access our recordings.

In the braille department, we were also faced with changing times. Not only did teachers need textbooks in braille for blind students, but up-to-the-minute, quick turnaround materials were needed as well. Having a loyal, flexible volunteer team and growing braille staff helped us meet those changing needs. There was also a huge increase of tactile drawings and graphs needed to help students participate in STEM classes, and maps for social studies and geography. And if this wasn't change enough, our volunteer team and staff embraced the new braille code, Unified English Braille, encompassing many changes in the rules and guidelines of braille formatting and production.

We still serve the individuals and organizations we helped ten years ago. At the same time we have broadened our reach to serve more organizations including the Milwaukee Public Museum and the Urban Ecology Center. Many of our audio books are now available to over 550,000 patrons nationwide.

Our growth is not finished. We know there are still unmet needs in the community—locally and throughout the country. We are excited to be part of the solution that will enable blind and print disabled individuals to have the same access to standard print as our peers.

I can't begin to express the depth of my gratitude to our committed ABLE staff, our passionate team of volunteers, our dedicated board of directors, and our loyal donors, ongoing and new. Together we are making strides towards equal access for all.

## ABLE Receives Prestigious Award

At the 2016 National Federation of the Blind annual convention in Orlando, Florida, Cheryl Orgas accepted one of their prestigious Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards on behalf of ABLE. ABLE was acknowledged as an innovator in helping blind people “live the lives they want.”



Dr. Jacob Bolotin, the namesake of the award program, was a blind physician who lived and practiced in Chicago from 1912 until his untimely death at age thirty-six. Dr. Bolotin was especially recognized for treating diseases of the heart and lungs. Despite his rigorous schedule tending to his patients' needs at all hours of the day and night, Dr. Bolotin also became known as a public speaker and advocate for the employment of the blind and their full integration into society.

Members of the blindness community submitted letters of support, urging that ABLE be considered for the award. One of those letters was from Alice Massa. Following are some excerpts from her letter:

Throughout the past 25 years that I have lived in Milwaukee, I can recall so many ways that ABLE has enhanced the lives of my students, the lives of friends who are blind or visually impaired, as well as my own life. When I was a fairly new resident of Wisconsin, the then "Volunteer Services for the

Visually Handicapped" (or VSVH – as ABLE was then called) brailled a Christmas message to accompany a Christmas card which was given to me by a new friend. I think I still have this thoughtful note in braille— a first for me.

When my family had a family reunion in Colorado, my uncle had prepared an extensive family tree to present to all family members. VSVH brailled this family tree for me in one volume, and I cannot tell you how many times I refer to this brailled book for birth and death dates, etc.

When one of my readers sent out her wedding invitations, mine came with the braille version— thanks to ABLE. What a pleasant and touching surprise for me!

Since going to the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts is a treat for me, I am always delighted to be able to request the programs for the Milwaukee Symphony and Pops Orchestra, as well as the playbills for Broadway shows. Of course, all of these were brailled by ABLE's excellent volunteers.

I could go on with even more ways that ABLE enhances lives in our community. Although I am retired from teaching, I, as a life-long learner, know that I will continue to rely on the wonderful services of ABLE.

Sincerely,  
Alice J. Massa



*Alice and Leader Dog Willow in Rochester, Michigan, June, 2016. Photo courtesy of Christie Bane, GDMI (Guide Dog Mobility Instructor at Leader Dog School)*

## Meet Our Staff!

The staff at ABLE are an amazingly creative and collaborative team. Kathy Bruening, with us since 2002, came to us as administrative assistant with the charge to learn braille as part of her duties. She embraced braille enthusiastically and became the braille coordinator in 2005. She is now our lead braille transcriber and a crucial member in supporting our volunteer braille team.

Claire Egan, with us since 2012, is our braille coordinator. Not only has she been the liaison for Milwaukee Public Schools, she has taken on supervising an amazing team of volunteer braille transcribers.

Matt Scholtes, a staff member since 2007, came on board as office manager. In 2014 Matt took on the development of tactile graphics with the use of computer drawing programs to meet a growing need. Now, due to the tremendous demand for tactiles and increased immediate-turnaround materials, Matt is ABLE's program and production manager and he also supervises a team of staff and volunteers doing tactile graphics and optical character recognition editing.

Sean Paulson came on board in 2012 for a special project in the audio department. When that project was completed, he became a tactile volunteer. In 2016, he was hired to assist Matt in tactile development.

In the audio department, Richard Robbins, with us since 2007, was hired to bring the audio department into the digital age while also managing our computer network. With his leadership, the audio department successfully moved to digital production.

This area grew so successfully that in 2014 we hired Andrew Jambura to assist with digital production and volunteer support. With the ABLE Sound Center now complete, Andrew

continues to assume additional responsibilities working with an enthusiastic team of readers and reviewers.

The ABLE group is complete with the addition of a new office manager, Karen Riendeau, who has been with us since early July of this year. Known as having an eagle eye, Karen quickly assumed management duties that include developing and implementing a thorough process for recruiting and onboarding new volunteers.

An introduction of our staff would not be complete without acknowledging Janet Kiekhofer, who came to ABLE following her retirement from a staff position at Industries for the Blind. She started as a volunteer and moved into office assistance as Matt became more involved in tactile development. Though Janet gave up her position in July of this year, she has returned to volunteering and we're pleased to see her almost every week.

What a team!

"A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and roots spring up and make new trees." —Amelia Earhart.

Our volunteers are responsible for so many trees, given their deep commitment to ABLE. Our thanks to each of them!

## Another Way to Give

Did you know that donations from IRAs may be given directly to charities such as ABLE instead of first passing through the account holder? This is particularly important when people reach 70½ years of age and are subject to required minimum distributions from their retirement accounts. Taxes may be avoided when the gift is sent directly from the IRA. Please give Cheryl a call at 414-286-3026 if you'd like to discuss this option.