



**Audio & Braille Literacy Enhancement, Inc.**  
Providing alternative ways for people with print disabilities to read  
Central Library Building 803 W. Wells St. Milwaukee, WI 53233  
(414) 286-3039 [www.ablenow.org](http://www.ablenow.org)

Winter 2020

## 55 Amazing Years, and Going Strong!



*The Braillewriter hasn't changed much over the years!*

of one of Sister Melmarie's students, Jodi Cowle, helped Sister found VSVH.

In 1965, there were eleven volunteers, no staff and two machines. The first recipients of VSVH's work were Sister Melmarie's students including the present executive director of ABLE, Cheryl Orgas.



*Braille editing*

on the fund-raising, job description, and recruitment for the eventual hiring of Kathy Strombom as coordinator.

By the early 1980's, there were three staff members and \$50,000 in equipment.

(Continued next page)

ABLE was created in 1965 out of a teacher's desperate need for her students to have brailled books at the same time as their sighted peers. This teacher, Sister Melmarie Stoll, taught at Holy Assumption school and worked with community leaders to develop a plan to provide blind children their materials in braille. With a commitment from the Milwaukee Public Library and a call for volunteers in the Mrs. Griggs column in the *Milwaukee Journal*, this organization was born. It was named VSVH—Volunteer Services for the Visually Handicapped. Jean Atkinson, a nationally renowned music brailist, along with Jackie Prochnow, the aunt



*Braille thermoform machine, from "back in the day."*

Soon VSVH took on more schools and began doing tactiles and audio recordings as well. At first books were brailled using a braille writer or slate and stylus, brailing one sheet at a time. If a mistake was made the brailist would have to start that page over again. Audio recordings were done with a reel-to-reel tape recorder.

Linda Horton came to VSVH in the '70s as a braille student and volunteer. She succeeded Jacquie Prochnow as coordinator (still as a volunteer) and realized that VSVH had grown to the point of needing a professional paid coordinator. She worked with the board of directors



*Reel-to-reel audio recording*

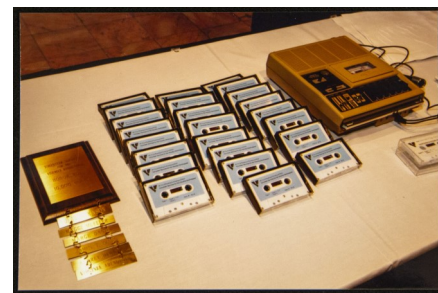


*Reel-to-reel reproduction*

In 1984, Audrey Hemmer took over the leadership at VSVH from Kathie Strombom; Audrey is still with us as a volunteer today. She has brailled nearly 24,000 pages, including a wide range of school materials, and has recently finished a Latin bibliography for one of our students, a Rufus King High school graduate.

We continued to grow in the late 80's and 90's and became a 501(c)(3) organization, independent from the Milwaukee Public Library but still a strongly valued tenant.

Although always at the Central Library building, we have moved a few times until we settled in our present location next to the Wisconsin Talking Book and Braille Library. In 2008 we changed our name from Volunteer Services for the Visually Handicapped to Audio and Braille Literacy Enhancement to better reflect the services we were providing.



*Cassette tapes were state-of-the-art at one time.*



*Audrey Hemmer, still hard at it after 40 years!*

In the last 14 years we have adapted our focus to meet the needs of blind and print disabled individuals. We still do many school related materials; now our focus is on providing many quick-turnaround assignments, handouts, quizzes, tests and foreign languages. The demand for tactiles has greatly increased as the commitment to and focus on STEM-related curriculum has risen. And we now have a state-of-the-art ABLE Sound Center with two sound booths, high quality microphones and computers—a far cry from the reel-to-reel recorder of the 1960's.

There are now 10 part-time staff, 50 volunteers working at home or in the ABLE office or Sound Center, and well over \$250,000 of equipment. And, in 2019, we had nearly 5,000 recipients.



*Sue Knorr, recording in ABLE's Sound Center*

In 2020, as with so many other nonprofit organizations in our community, ABLE has adapted our services in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. ABLE staff and volunteers are mostly working remotely, and only going into the office as needed for audio, braille, and tactile projects. Even during this difficult time, our dedicated volunteers have given nearly 5,500 hours of service so far this year.

As a past student of Sister Melmarie Stoll, recipient of ABLE services, executive director since 2007 and serving as its executive director even in these unprecedented times, I am so proud to lead us into the future. The way we produce braille, tactile and audio products has changed, but what hasn't changed is our commitment to have a team of volunteers as an integral part of the production process and our mission to provide alternative ways for people with print disabilities to read.

—Cheryl Orgas

## This Year's Award Recipients!

We would like to publicly acknowledge our volunteer award winners for 2020. Please join us in thanking them for their outstanding service!

250+ hours Karen Riccobono: Braille

500+ hours Dale Kuehn: Tactile

750+ hours Carol Hioki: Tactile

750+ hours Tom Littellmann: Audio

2,000+ hours Sue Roberts: Braille

2,500+ hours Cindy Kaczmarowski: Braille

10,000+ hours Lenore Tesch: Braille

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## The Value of Volunteers

The time, skills and energy that our volunteers provide are invaluable to us and to those we serve. In 2019, our audio volunteers logged **1,756** hours, and our braille volunteers, **4,440** hours. That's a total of **6,196** hours! While we don't think about our volunteers' service in terms of dollars and cents until it's time for our annual financial review, the Independent Sector ([www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org)) calculated a value of \$25.43 per volunteer hour for 2019. For ABLE, that comes to an amazing **\$157,564.28** worth of donated time in 2019. We can't possibly thank each and every one of our volunteers enough.

*Reading is a discount ticket to everywhere. —Mary Schmich*

## ABLE's Outstanding Audio Program

ABLE's audio books program serves nearly 7,000 patrons of the Wisconsin Talking Book and Braille Library and over 550,000 individuals throughout the whole country. Since 2015, ABLE has been recording audio books in our own state-of-the-art Sound Center with a quality that meets the digital recording standards of the National Library Service for the Blind and Printed Disabled (NLS). In partnership with the NLS and the Wisconsin Talking Book and Braille Library, ABLE's volunteer readers record a wide variety of books for both children and adults, with an emphasis on Wisconsin authors. Volunteer narrators, who undergo significant training, read aloud in the ABLE Sound Center while staff members edit the books they are reading on the spot.

The fiction and nonfiction audiobooks that ABLE produces are a lifeline for our recipients, providing books that would not otherwise be available to the blindness community.

Among the Wisconsin authors whose books we have recorded are Zola Gale of Portage, Margot Peters from Wausau, Meg Jones and Victoria Houston of Rhinelander, and Louis Clark from the Oneida Reservation. Without ABLE, audiobook patrons would not have access to books by these—and other—Wisconsin authors.

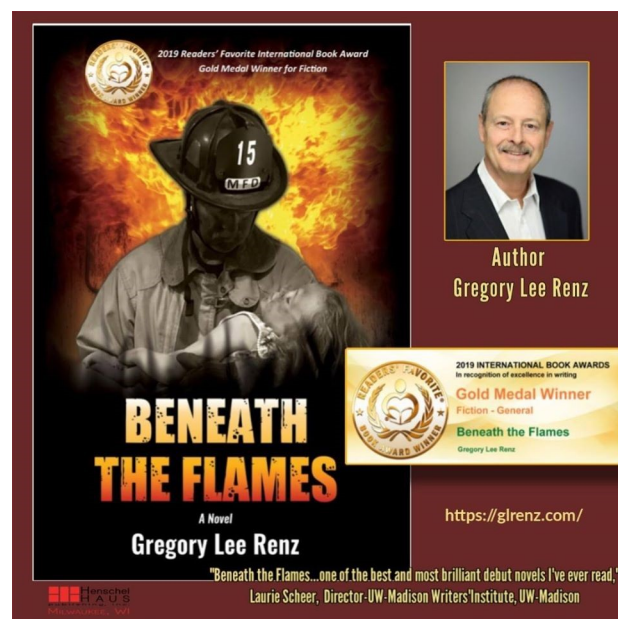
On the next page, we are excited to share the news of one book, *Beneath the Flames*...



## *Beneath the Flames* Recorded at ABLE by Author Greg Renz

We are celebrating the release of *Beneath the Flames*, a book read in ABLE's Sound Center by its Wisconsin author Greg Renz. *Beneath the Flames* is a coming-of-age love story and a clear-eyed, heartbreaking perspective of life in the inner city. The divisive issues of race and poverty and the clash of rural and urban values are explored and dissected with great skill and sensitivity.

Greg's audio book is available not only through the Wisconsin Talking Book and Braille Library for blind and print disabled individuals, but is also available to the public through Audible and through Greg's website: [glenz.com](https://glenz.com). Non-subscribers to Audible can purchase the download; subscribers can download it for free as one of their selections as part of their monthly Audible agreement.



For nonsubscribers to Audible, Amazon is offering a free one-month membership where the audiobook can be downloaded for free. There is no requirement to subscribe after the one-month free trial.

“*Beneath the Flames* by Gregory Lee Renz is a mesmerizing story that brims with life and humanity, a story that explores themes of race, love, family, and an adventure within the firefighting department. The prose is gorgeous and, from the very beginning, the author had me captivated by the wonderful imagery and the lyrical nature of the story.” —Readers’ Favorite Five-Star Review.

### Meet Our 2020 Board of Directors

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