

Nashville Talking Library

Thirty Years Later

Fran Ziglar

Station Manager, Nashville Talking Library

December 17, 1975, was a cold crisp day in Nashville. It was an exciting day for the WPLN Talking Library: the first day on the air for the new radio reading service, and the first time individuals with visual impairments in Middle Tennessee could hear readings from *The Tennessean* and the *Nashville Banner* on a special receiver right in their living rooms. The station offered bestsellers, the current week's newsmagazines, and local books that weren't available in any format other than print. We had a roomful of people at the Opening Day reception: listeners, volunteers, reporters, photographers, city and state officials, even Minnie Pearl was there to support our debut! I was young--not even thirty--and I was in awe of the opportunity I had fallen into.

The service was the brainchild of public radio station WPLN Station Manager Alvin Bolt, Nashville Public Library Special Projects Director Lillias Burns, and Library Director Marshall Stewart. They obtained the money to start an innovative project that used the sideband of WPLN to broadcast readings of books, newspapers, and magazines to individuals who could not read normally printed matter. They visited radio reading services in other states. They hired a staff, and established the basic mission and concept of the station. They worked closely with the Tennessee State Library and Archives, the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, and Tennessee Services for the Blind. These organizations were incredibly supportive of the project, doing things like buying receivers, certifying the eligibility of listeners, and helping us develop a mailing list to contact our original listener base.

By the day we signed on, volunteer coordinator Ethel Lutin had screened and trained a corps of volunteers. Carl Pedersen, engineer, had bought the necessary equipment, designed, and wired the new studios. I was working

as the program manager, determining what went on the air and the format of the broadcast day. The staff also included veteran announcer Chuck Mitchell; assistant engineer, Steve Terry, who kept our broadcast equipment and receivers in good repair; and listener services coordinator Betty Bigelow, who kept us in touch with the information needs of our consumers. Several months later, Jim Stanford was named station manager, and announcer Ernest Manning joined the staff. When we first signed on, we were on the air 11 hours a day, Monday through Friday. Volunteers recorded books in their homes on reel-to-reel tape recorders. Books and tapes traveled back and forth through the mail. Volunteers came in to read the newspapers live, and to record magazines and special programs in our soundproof booths.

We were located in the Howard School Building on Second Avenue downtown. The school building had been renovated for Metro offices, and we had brand new furniture, carpeting, and bookcases in blue, red, orange, and mustard (Don't forget it was the 70s!). They had placed our offices in the former school library, and our storage was in the chemistry lab. I loved it. We had so much space, everything was new, and our tall windows offered a gorgeous view of amazing winter sunsets.

Today, much has changed, but a lot has stayed the same. We are still a service of the Nashville Public Library, but our volunteers now record on computers in our new studios located in the former Madison Branch Library building. We are a 24/7 service, broadcasting through the facilities of WPLN (now independent from the Library), and on the SAP channel of WNPT (Channel 8). We are available on most of the broadcast systems of local hospitals, and we have placed receivers in 42 counties in Middle Tennessee. We share programming with several radio reading services in other part of the country, by satellite and by exchanging programs on CD-ROM.

The Nashville Talking Library currently offers a variety of programming, including local magazines and newspapers and more than 90 publications such as the New York Times, Vanity Fair, GQ, Family Circle, National Enquirer, Wall Street Journal. Listeners can tune in to an exercise program, local history, movie reviews, or information related to their disability. Other choices include the daily TV schedule, or the obituaries. We air readings from an average of 10 books every month, emphasizing bestsellers, mysteries, biographies, books of local interest, and books for children. Our

newest weekly program airs Saturday mornings and is based on the "Dummies" series of books.

Our remarkable volunteers produce almost all of our programming. They come in at 6:45 in the morning Monday through Saturday, and on Sunday afternoons to read the Tennessean. They spend hours recording materials in our booths and putting together readings for special programs. Over the years at least 1000 people have read for us. They are all valuable--from the individuals who started last month to the ones who have been here more than twenty-five years.

Their work has improved the quality of life for thousands of individuals in middle Tennessee and around the country. The readings they have produced have enabled our listeners to do comparative grocery shopping, and to know not only the headlines, but also their daily horoscopes. They get to hear bestsellers, brainteasers, and a special message on their birthdays.

The Nashville Talking Library, a free service of Nashville Public Library, is available in 42 counties in middle Tennessee. Anyone who cannot read normally printed matter because of a visual or physical impairment or a learning disability is eligible. If you know of someone who could benefit from this service, please contact us for more information. We will gladly send you display materials and applications for your library.

Cumulative totals since 1975

Hours on the air: 227,000

Listeners: 10,000

Books Broadcast: 4,750

Volunteers: 1200

Hours donated by volunteers: 260,000

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