

BLIND



Photo by Kurt Ellison

Ray Westman transcribes math, which requires special skills. Four of the 20

volunteers in the Transcribers are qualified to Braille math.

Bringing books to the blind

5-23-86
Braille transcribers provide access to literature and learning

By CANDACE ATKINS

Every Tuesday, a group of ladies gather in Capitola for an enjoyable afternoon. They do not play canasta, sew or sip tea and munch butter cookies. They translate literature for the blind.

Through their efforts, the women have enabled visually handicapped students to have school texts and leisure books "printed" in Braille, a system of raised dots on heavy paper, that are read by touch. "The Transcribers Guild" was formed in 1960 through the County Office of Education, and since 1967, has been headed by Bette Bielefeldt.

"Braille is an addiction," said Bielefeldt. "If it's not enjoyable, you're not going to stick with it. You must enjoy the process."

Transcribers learn to Braille through a series of 16 lessons. At first, each word is spelled out completely, and later, transcri-

bers learn to use letter and word contractions in a type of Braille shorthand. Most Braille readers know the contractual form, which is taught in Santa Cruz County schools.

"If you start (learning to transcribe) in September, by June, you'll be Brailleing a book," said Bielefeldt, who teaches Braille to volunteers. "Brailleing takes a lot of work at home, it isn't just coming in for a lesson. You start Brailleing on the machine by the 10th lesson. You must concentrate on form and forget what you're doing. Eventually, it gets like a typewriter."

The youngest Brailer in the Transcribers Guild is 40 years old. "Older people who volunteer usually have enough money to live on and want to pay something back," said Bielefeldt. "Younger people just haven't worked out so far, it's not for their time of life. This is a work, not a social group."

Patience, concentration and the discipline to work at a steady pace are all requirements for a good Brailist. Most volunteers said the work is relaxing and interesting, but they can have no other distractions while they transcribe.

"It is very irritating to have someone walk in on you," said volunteer Virginia Pate. "I have to have it absolutely quiet. Some people turn on the radio while they transcribe. That would drive me crazy."

Braille pages must be transcribed perfectly. One mistake and the entire page has to be redone. Bielefeldt said a practiced Brailist will do about five pages per hour, which includes proofreading. Most Brailists work in half-hour sittings, since the work requires complete attention and accuracy. Transcribing speed, she said, is secondary to precision.

Braille was introduced in 1824

Continued on page 9

Braille

Continued from page 1
by Louis Braille, a blind student who lived in France. He developed the method of reading after his own frustrating attempts to "read" books printed in embossed type. Reading by this method was tedious, since each letter had to be synthesized. By developing a system based on six dots arranged to represent letters and numbers, Braille and other blind students were able to read with much more speed, and through Braille "writing," the visually disabled could now take notes in class, write their own assignments, and for the first time, record their own ideas.

There have been other systems of touch reading used by the blind, but the Braille System is the most widespread, and is the only form of transcription used at the County Office of Education. All Braille is the same

size; it is designed so that each character or contraction will fit under the reader's finger. Some people learn to read with both hands and can read 250 words per minute. The average Braille reading rate is about half that.

Bielefeldt said it is a race every year for transcribers to keep up with local students' reading requirements. There are two high school students and one elementary student who need books in Braille. Students receive one or two Braille volumes at a time, which represent only a small portion of the entire book. There are only 25 lines to each page of braille; a 350-page printed text will become 15 to 20 Braille books. If the County Office of Education had to purchase Braille literature, each book would cost \$200 to \$300. The cost of transcription, because of the volunteer labor, is \$9 per ream for paper,

plus 50-cents for each volume cover. A good percentage of the paper must be thrown out because of mistakes, said Bielefeldt.

But Braille books can be reused many times, she noted, and the Santa Cruz COE Braille Library is part of a nationwide exchange program.

"Our books are sent all over the country," said Bielefeldt. "Math books are always on the go. This (1984-85 school) year, we will ship to Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Missouri and Pennsylvania. Most of the books are sent to small towns where they do not have enough materials."

Transcribed textbooks that are declared obsolete are sent to Denver, where they are donated to schools all over the world, said Bielefeldt. A Braille book is never thrown away, although it is possible for them to wear too flat to be accurately read.

"Some books come back (from the exchange program) in very poor condition," she said. "They do wear out."

In the coming weeks, volunteers will begin transcribing into Braille, books for the three local blind students. Bielefeldt's job is to transcribe what "students need tomorrow — tests, special assignments."

Most of the volunteers agree that Braille is never boring, but transcribing foreign languages, math concepts (which requires special Braille skills) and sophisticated science books, can become tedious.

"We've done a lot of Dungeons and Dragons this year," said Bielefeldt. "We've taken one (local) student from kindergarten to high school."