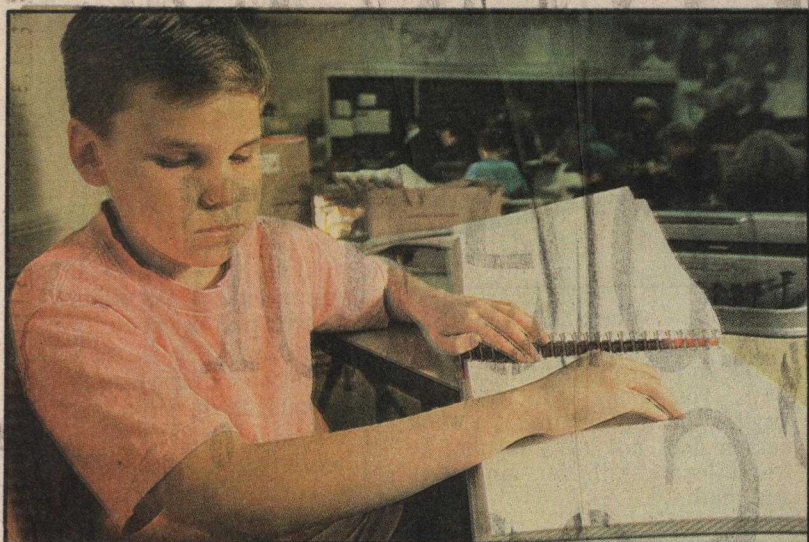


✓ BLIND

A feel for reading

11-17-91

Blind students keep up at school, thanks to Braille transcribers



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Zack Bock, 13, is a top student and a Braille student.

By TRACIE WHITE
Sentinel staff writer

"OF MICE AND MEN," an average-sized novel in English, translates into four volumes of Braille. "Where the Red Fern Grows" equals five volumes. Don't even talk about a math textbook. The reams of pages in Braille cover an entire shelf.

It's no wonder Zane Bock looks tired. Seated at a table in the back of Don Sowden's English class at Mission Hill Junior High School, Zane slouches in his chair, rests his head in his hand and yawns. He needs a table instead of a desk because of the volumes of material that surround him. He's buried behind stacks of Shakespeare.

Blind since birth, Zane learned Braille when he was 5 years old. Without it, he could never have made it through the public school system. With it, Zane, 13, plans to go to college. His English teacher suggests law school.

"He's a good reader," Sowden said. "He reads adult stuff, which is really great. He has an incredible memory. His spell-

ing is above average. He can write Braille as fast as the other kids can write. He's required to do the same amount of reading and the same amount of writing as the other kids."

The only problem is that he reads slowly. And that's because he has to read three or four times as many pages as the other kids do.

"There doesn't seem to be any way to solve that," Sowden said. He points to his own desk. It's piled high with four volumes of "White Fang" written in Braille. The textbook for the class takes up 20 volumes of Braille.

"By the time he gets to high school he'll need a grocery cart," jokes Connie Unsicker, a teacher of the visually impaired hired by the county Office of Education who helps Zane with his Braille.

WHAT HAS many blind people and advocates for the blind concerned is the dwindling number of volunteers available to translate all this material into Braille. A misconception that the use of Braille is waning makes things even worse, they say.

"Braille has been produced by volunteers almost always in the history of the U.S.," said Unsicker. "Braille is very slow and tedious to transcribe. If you paid the county's volunteer Braillists for the amount of work they do, it would just be a phenomenal amount of money." Estimates for how much it would cost statewide to pay for the volunteer work done by Braillists hover at about \$2.4 million a year.

"More and more people need to work and don't have time to volunteer," Unsicker said. "Our group meets two to three hours once a week on Tuesdays. They do their Braille at home 10 to 20 hours a week. They're doing it in an isolated situation. There's not a lot of social interaction. The code is very detailed. We have several people who are retired bookkeepers or accountants who like balancing figures at home."

The small group of volunteer Braillists, mostly retired women, have been meeting in different corners around the county for years. The number has dwindled recently, down from about 20 to 12. Their work is donated to a national library sys-

tem, which sends the obsolete texts to third world countries.

"We've been meeting wherever there's a spare room," said Flora Mayblum who started volunteering as a Braillist for the county in 1973. She began learning Braille the day after she retired from her work in accounting. "They put us in little cold drafty places. We'd take our coffee cups and leave."

It takes up to five years to become a proficient Braillist, said . She has been translating school texts into Braille for 18 years, yet she can't remember ever meeting any of the blind children that have benefited from her work.

"If a child knows it takes six people working day and night to produce one book ..." she said, trailing off. "We don't want them to think they're different from the other kids." So the volunteers, she said, remain behind the scene.

THE COUNTY employs six teachers who work with 40 visually impaired students. The majority of these students are able to read large print but five or

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'We don't want them to think they're different from the other kids.'

— *Flora Mayblum, right, on why Braille volunteers remain behind the scene*



Braille

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six, like Zane, read only in Braille. They're set up with Braille typewriters called Perkins Braille in each classroom.

Technology has come a long way in helping the blind, said Unsicker. Zane can now type Braille into a "Versabrailler," then electronically run it through an Apple computer, and it will come out in print. He keeps a computer at home and at school.

"It sounds strange but it is a good time to be blind," said Noel Bock, Zane's stepmother. But despite the technological advances, she said, nothing can replace Braille itself. "Could you get along without a pencil?"

Booktapes, talking computers, all kinds of technology have done wonderful things for the blind, but Braille is in no way outdated, said Elizabeth Schrieffer, a representative of CTEVH (California Transcribers and Educators of the Visually Handicapped).

"A lot of people have that idea, that it's passe," Schrieffer said. "That's just not so. All you have to do is talk to an active blind adult."

Despite technological advances, nothing can replace Braille.

The Braille Revival League, an affiliate of the American Council of the Blind, formed in 1981 in response to a decline in the teaching and use of Braille, said Vernon Daigle, a member of the league.

"The majority of the members are blind," said Daigle. "I'm totally blind. I grew up with Braille. At the time I went to (a school for the blind) in the '30s and '40s everybody learned Braille."

Daigle maintains there's both a lack of qualified Braille teachers nationwide and that much of the material for the blind is now being replaced by taped versions.

"So much material is now available in recorded form," Daigle said. "It's a good thing to have, but at the same time it cannot take the place of written material. Just stop

and think — how would you manage without your newspaper? How would you learn punctuation? How would you compose literature or anything of that nature? If a blind person does not learn Braille, he won't learn skills for languages and math."

ZANE LISTENS to a number of book tapes that he gets through a program set up by the Library of Congress for the blind. Stephen King books are his favorite. He listens to tapes for pleasure reading. But when it comes to school work, he has to use his Braille.

He also uses Braille at home. His stepmother has picked up enough Braille to be able to put Braille labels on the soup cans and peanut butter jars, the washer and dryer. He also has children's books with plastic overlays in Braille so that he can read books to his 3-year-old sister.

He smiles when asked what life would be like without Braille and gives a 13-year-old's answer. "School would be a lot easier. They couldn't assign me anything."

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