

Trabing



Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing

One of the mental pains of being blind is the loneliness of being shunted off into a special group of those with like handicaps. This is especially true during the sensitive years of schooling.

But something great has happened in Santa Cruz county.

Blind youngsters are now Joe Blows right along side of their seeing colleagues in the school system. They read Dick and Jane and Spot, catch what-for from the teacher, and throw spit balls — although their aim may be slightly off target.

The program began here this September, according to Dick Struck, director of guidance and special education. It took some doing.

A specialist, Jean Dodson, was hired to teach braille reading and writing.

Up to last year, blind students were sent to a special school at Berkeley. Now they go to school in their neighborhood just like any kid.

Mrs. Dodson, a tall, strikingly pretty woman, travels from school to school — sometimes 800 miles a month in the county — teaching youngsters how to work their braille machines, and braille desk writers, and pocket note book writers.

When blind persons become experienced in interpreting the hundreds of raised dots on the hard paper into words and phrases, they can read as fast as a sighted person can read aloud from a book.

"But our fingers are not naturally receptive to feeling out these dots," she said. "Little fingers must be sensitized."

"We train them in feeling awareness with sandpaper, steel wool, velvet and other textures."

They start with the alphabet: ". for 'a'; : for 'b'; and .. for 'c.'" Later they learn word contractions and the advanced braille becomes sort of like shorthand.

The state department of education furnishes all the major text books in braille, starting with "Dick and Jane" on up through algebra in high school, so that the blind student can follow along with whatever the class is doing.

Reader Digest puts out an edition in braille and makes it available to the schools.

A weekly news digest is punched out for the students.

Mrs. Dodson said that practically all the famous books — from Plato to Hemmingway — are in braille.

There even is an encyclopedia and dictionaries in braille.

It's bulky though. Braille words can't be condensed like regular words. It takes two and one-half pages to cover the same material appearing in one page of regular book type.

One student at Watsonville keeps his books in sort of a rolling library cart near his desk.

Mrs. Dodson not only teaches braille but must make up the tests — put them in braille herself for the blind student. Then she must translate them back into typewritten form for the teachers.

At Santa Cruz High school a blind student recently punched out a 60-page report on the Cuban crisis. The translation by Mrs. Dodson took 20 typewritten pages.

But there is still a great deal to be put into braille.

It is detailed and tedious work. Recently one woman translated a child's book on Huckleberry Finn. It took her two months.

Some months ago, a call went out for volunteers to act as volunteer translators. It involved no pay and a year's work to learn this art at night school. School officials were not too optimistic.

Fifty persons volunteered. Thirty-four persons are hard at work in two classes under the direction of Florence Henderson.

When trained, they will help build the schools braille library, and translate school work when needed.

You can bet the blind appreciate this a hundred times more than pity.

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