

Radio Talking Book Service helps the visually impaired stay connected

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ost of us get our news by scanning the daily paper, reading our favorite subscription magazine, or scrolling through an online website. We may even listen to snippets while driving to work. But for over 38,000 Nebraska residents who are visually impaired, they don't have that same luxury. What they do have is access to various radio options that allows them to tune into 24/7 programming provided by the local non-profit organization Radio Talking Book Service (RTBS).

Ryan Osentowski

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PHOTOGRAPHY





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voices



Founded in 1974 by Dr. Craig Fullerton, RTBS was his vision to inform, educate, and engage individuals with visual impairments. RTBS broadcasts on sub-carrier frequencies donated by KIOS-FM in Omaha and NET statewide. With its modest recording studios and control room, the organization has two services: Radio Talking Book Network (RTBN), a radio reading service, and Listening Link, an educational reading service.

Since its inception, RTBS has relied on volunteers to come in and record themselves reading from a variety of sources: newspapers, magazines, and books. Both the *Omaha World-Herald* and *Lincoln Journal Star* are read live daily, while nine other newspapers from across Nebraska, as well as books, magazines, weekly grocery and department store ads are recorded and broadcast as specific times throughout the day. RTBS provides eligible print impaired listeners with a radio receiver at no cost to tune into programming.

Technology has drastically changed in the 43 years since RTBS began, and the organization has made great strides in recent years to upgrade its own technology. A 35-year-old sound board was replaced in 2017, and now listeners have on-de-

mand access to broadcasts via podcasts on the RTBS website as well as listening using online apps. Technology upgrades at RTBS are funded through grants applied for each year.

Jane Nielsen, Executive Director for RTBS, credits the longevity of the organization to its staff and network of dedicated volunteers. “We have about 70 regular monthly volunteers who just love to read,” she said. Many are retired teachers, professionals, or those that have been in radio before. Reading out loud is a little different from reading to yourself, and RTBS has every new volunteer do a test read and then provides them with training on the recording equipment. They even have a few volunteers who are set up to record from home and then upload the recordings.

Nielsen said they are always looking for new information and ways to tie it into current events. For example, the Omaha League of Women Voters provides a voter’s guide prior to elections, which RTBS records and broadcasts. They’ve also had local authors read their books, and this past Christmas a British volunteer read Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. “We look for any material that would be educational, informative, or entertaining for our listeners,” Nielsen said.

Running not only a non-profit but also a 24/7 radio station is no easy feat. But even with three long-time staffers recently retiring, Nielsen has found new talent in a staff that has reenergized the organization. Ryan Osentowski is the station manager, Michael Halula is the board operator, Betty Deepe coordinates all the volunteers, and Bekah Jerde, assistant director, is now the longest serving member of the team. They also plan an annual fundraiser each spring, “Wining in the Dark,” in which attendees participate in a blind-folded wine and food tasting to raise money for the organization.

Connecting Nebraska’s visually impaired with RTBS is a key component of the organization’s mission, so awareness of what they provide is imperative. They were able to increase listenership by more than 2,300 individuals in 2017 alone. Having a constant stream of volunteers as well as donations is what RTBS relies on in order to continue to provide the quality, relevant programming that they’ve become known for among the visually impaired community. “If you know someone who is blind, visually impaired, or print disabled, we’d love to connect with them,” Nielsen said. “And we are always looking for volunteers who simply love to read. ■




Jane Nielsen, Bekah Jerde, Ryan Osentowski, Betty Deepe

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