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Spotlight on Quality: Kathleen Kappel

**Kathi Kappel**

Blind and physically handicapped readers rely on the 112 NLS cooperating libraries across the country and in U.S. territories to provide braille and recorded books and magazines. In 2010 more than 26 million copies of NLS titles were circulated to a readership exceeding 900,000.

These libraries provide more than reading materials. Many offer services that not only enrich their patrons' reading experiences but also support independence in other areas of their lives.

This article, the fourth in a series that profiles librarians who exemplify the highest aspirations of the NLS mission, features Kathleen "Kathi" Kappel, director of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (LBPH) since 2002, who has three decades of experience in library service to individuals with disabilities.

NLS: Carnegie LBPH serves 36 counties in Western Pennsylvania; how many patrons do you serve? How many staff members and volunteers do you have?

Kathi: We have approximately 10,000 patrons served by 22 full-time staff members. Vision and Voice, our volunteer program, currently boasts 60 active volunteers who perform many valuable tasks. Some narrate, monitor, and edit master recordings for our Pennsylvania Collection, which comprises titles about Pennsylvania history, works by regional authors, and stories set in our Keystone State. Others inspect and rewind audiocassette books, assist with mailing projects, and accompany staff on outreach trips.

And, of course, there are our Pioneers, who repair malfunctioning equipment. Without them our supply of working audiocassette players would dwindle even more rapidly. These volunteers are very self-sufficient, ordering parts, assigning tasks, recruiting new volunteers with targeted experience when necessary, and even making their own coffee! This is volunteerism at its best.

NLS: You are actively involved in fostering partnerships with various groups, especially with the disabled and special-needs

communities. How do these partnerships come about?

Kathi: We talk about LBPH's mission *everywhere* and with *everyone*, networking whenever and wherever possible. This might involve providing speakers for diverse groups, both profit and nonprofit, and discovering others' passions. Friends and families, congregations, and social service groups are all good venues.

What I find most fun is connecting dots—being creative in forming unusual or unexpected partnerships, then coming up with a match that is beneficial to both LBPH and the partner.

One such match is our Ready and Able program, a joint effort with the Pittsburgh Public Schools Community-Based Vocational Education Office. Student and young adult volunteers with autism edit new digital masters and have converted all of our previously recorded titles from analog to digital format. The program has helped the volunteers learn workplace protocol, social skills, and the use of public transportation—all while improving and expanding the library's collections. It's been so successful that it has been expanded to include volunteers with physical disabilities from United Cerebral Palsy of Pittsburgh.

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The Program

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress, publishes books and magazines in braille and in recorded form for readers who cannot hold, handle, or see well enough to read conventional print because of a temporary or permanent visual or physical handicap.

Through a national network of state and local libraries, the materials are loaned free to eligible readers in the United States and to U.S. citizens living abroad. Materials are sent to readers and returned by postage-free mail.

Books and Magazines

Readers may borrow all types of popular-interest books including bestsellers, classics, mysteries, westerns, poetry, history, biographies, religious literature, children's books, and foreign-language materials. Readers may also subscribe to more than seventy popular magazines in braille and recorded formats.

Special Equipment

Special equipment needed to play the audiobooks is loaned indefinitely to readers. An amplifier with headphone is available for blind and physically handicapped readers who are also certified as hearing impaired. Other devices are provided to aid readers with mobility impairments in using playback machines.

Eligibility

You are eligible for the Library of Congress program if

- You are legally blind—your vision in the better eye is 20/200 or less with correcting glasses, or your widest diameter of visual field is no greater than 20 degrees;
- You cannot see well enough or focus long enough to read standard print, although you wear glasses to correct your vision;
- You are unable to handle print books or turn pages because of a physical handicap; or
- You are certified by a medical doctor as having a reading disability, due to an organic dysfunction, which is of sufficient severity to prevent reading in a normal manner.

How to Apply

You may request an application by writing NLS or calling toll-free 1-888-NLS-READ, and your name will be referred to your cooperating library.

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Editor: Ingrid Davitt

Contributors: Jane Caulton, Lina Dutky, Mark Layman, and Claire Rojstaczer

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Another success is our Ellis School partnership, a pilot project with a Pittsburgh independent school to produce digital masters remotely. Students who pass their audition narrate books for our Pennsylvania collection in a specially designed area of the school. The equipment they use is also specially designed to compensate for ambient noises, so even without a soundproof booth, the sound quality is excellent. We plan to expand this program to include universities and other secondary schools across our service area.

Some partnership possibilities are obvious, others not so. But all of them can be beneficial.

NLS: The Carnegie Library's LBPH received the NLS Network Library of the Year Award in 2007 and the AARP Award for Excellence that same year. What other awards have you received, on behalf of the library and personally?

Kathi: In 2009 I was honored to be appointed by Governor Ed Rendell to the Pennsylvania Advisory Committee for the Blind. In 2010 Carnegie LBPH was recognized as a Centennial 100 Supporter by the Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh for our contributions over the past century. In 2008, we received the Senate of Pennsylvania Special Recognition Award, which is given to those libraries that make a profound impact on the communities they serve.

These are just a few of the awards the library, its staff, and volunteers have received over the years. There are many others, including the 2007 Francis Joseph Campbell Award, given to former LBPH director Sue Murdock for her pioneering efforts to automate libraries for the blind and physically handicapped, which culminated in the formation of a six-state, 15-library software consortium.

NLS: What are some of the more popular programs that Carnegie LBPH offers its patrons?

Kathi: In addition to the on-site book discussion groups, which we plan to expand through communication technology, we provide several programs and initiatives that have been well received by patrons and the public alike. LBPH is always an active participant in Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Summer Reading Extravaganza for families. Staff and volunteers offer hands-on activities to heighten awareness of non-print alternatives for reading and communication. An award-winning, staff-designed activity called Initially Braille is very popular.

For several years now students enrolled in the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) School of Design have brought models of consumer products they have designed—cell phones, stovetops, cameras, irons—to our library, where they are examined and discussed by library patrons who are blind. The students modify their designs based on the feedback patrons give. The project culminates with a display of the students' products at CMU that students, LBPH patrons, and a library representative attend.

LBPH readers have participated in two other research projects conducted by graduate students at CMU. One involved a touch screen powered by TeslaTouch, a technology developed by Disney Research, Pittsburgh. The two-dimensional touch screen uses electrostatic friction to render tactile shapes and images that may be "read" by touch. It has the potential to provide a novel means of communication for blind individuals and provide access to touch-screen graphics.

In the second project, library patrons were interviewed about how they navigate the city and use their senses to interact with their environment. This information will be

used to develop a tactile “interactive map” to assist visually impaired individuals.

NLS: Public relations and outreach are a very big part of Carnegie LBPH’s programming. What are some of the more successful events and projects?

Kathi: Staff members have visited all 36 counties that our library serves in our outreach van, Mobile LBPH, which was made possible by a grant from Commonwealth Libraries of Pennsylvania. In 2010 we visited 81 destinations, including health and senior expos, legislator fairs, personal care homes, libraries, schools, day-care centers, Lions Club meetings, and retirement communities, where we’ve demonstrated the digital player and signed up people on the spot. Mobile LBPH has been used as a model in other states.

We support outreach with an active publicity program. During the transition to digital—since 2006 we have been featured in nearly 100 articles, radio shows, and TV interviews reaching a minimum of 3 million or more people. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ran a lengthy article about the library and the NLS conversion to a digital format, and WDUQ, a Pittsburgh public-broadcasting station, also reported on the conversion.

NLS: Budget constraints are seriously affecting the network libraries’ operations—several have closed their doors during the past few years. How is the economy affecting Carnegie LBPH? What are you and your staff doing to deal with funding cuts?

Kathi: Because we are carrying six vacant positions, we are challenged to meet priorities and keep staff morale high. Fortunately, readers’ enthusiasm for digital service is contagious—hearing so many excited comments every day does help to keep our smiles showing.

We explore technology and use it whenever possible, particularly by enhancing CUL, our customized software registration-and-circulation system. We are also exploring the use of Facebook, Twitter, and other electronic methods to contact people and

thus send out fewer mailings in order to conserve supplies and postage. We contact people via e-mail as much as possible.

Our staff, volunteers, and partners design, create, and print materials in-house instead of outsourcing to more expensive vendors, and we produce fewer reference, program, and outreach materials at one time to keep information current while conserving supplies and reducing costs. We have also developed a news page for our website.

We have been forced to reduce the number of staff members who attend conferences and training seminars to save travel costs and fees. Instead we instituted cross-training within the Carnegie Library system, increased participation in webinars, and regularly schedule in-house seminars where staff attendees share their knowledge and experiences with others.

Then there are the obvious cost-savers, such as keeping the building cooler in winter and warmer in summer to conserve energy; not renewing expensive maintenance agreements on older equipment and, as much as possible, finding avenues to purchase replacements that have lengthy warranties; and scheduling multiple outreach visits on each trip in order to save on materials and travel costs. And for many years we have had to use private donations to pay for additions to the large-print and descriptive audio collections.

One of our most effective ways of dealing with the economic crunch is laughter—much, much laughter.

NLS: What are some of the biggest changes, good and bad, you have witnessed during your time as director?

Kathi: The conversion to a digital format is the most revolutionary change in services to blind and physically handicapped readers since the talking-book record was introduced in 1934. It is unfortunate that this transition is happening at a time when the current economic downturn has resulted in curtailed funding for libraries and missed opportunities to expand services when they are needed most.

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