

What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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It Takes a Village to Read a Book

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You've heard the phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child." Well sometimes it takes a village to read a book. Lois Kotkoskie is among the 400 volunteers at the New Jersey unit of Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic come in. In addition to a fulltime job as a toxicologist at Novo Nordisk, Kotkoskie has made time each week for the past 14 years to put her professional knowledge to additional use, by recording complex medical and technical books for people who have difficulty reading because of sight impairment and dyslexia as well as people with learning disabilities.

The unit is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a gala dinner and awards program Thursday, April 17, at 6 p.m. at the Hyatt Regency Princeton. The event will honor several individuals and corporations including Catherine D. Brown; Peg and James Hastings; Anne Young; Amy and Jay Regan of the Harbourton Foundation; Eleanor Home, vice president of the social investment fund at Educational Testing Services; and Avaya, a privately-held telecommunications company with world headquarters in Basking Ridge.

The gala is just one part of the unit's annual anniversary celebration, which also includes a record-a-thon from April 10 to 17 during which unit volunteers and celebrity readers read and record books. This year's celebrity readers include Melvin Benarde, reading from his book, "Our Precarious Habitat. . .It's In Your Hands"; Freeman Dyson, reading from his book, "A Many-colored Glass: Reflections on the Place of Life in the Universe"; Norman Itzkowitz, reading from his book, "A Wicked History: Grigory Rasputin"; Nobel Prize-winner Eric Maskin; Paul Stankard, author of "No Green Berries or Leaves: The Creative Journey of an Artist in Glass," who has created a slide show about his life with dyslexia; Paul Steinhardt, reading from his book, "Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang"; and John Weingart, author of "Waste Is a Terrible Thing to Mind."

Kotkoskie and her fellow volunteers agree to spend an hour and a half each week recording books. While it may sound easy to just sit and read into a recorder each week, the reality is anything but. Kotkoskie, as one of the unit's specialists, takes on the more complex medical and scientific books that the unit produces for its members. Currently she is reading a surgical nursing textbook. Everything in the book must be explained verbally, including all of the charts and graphs, illustrations and diagrams.

"In the illustration of a surgery I have to explain how the skin is pulled back and what the organs look like," says Kotkoskie. "You need to use something common, that everyone knows, to explain something the person has never seen. I use food analogies a lot for body parts, such as describing the kidney as looking like spaghetti and meatballs." It takes excellent improvisation skills. Volunteers look over the text they are to read for only a few minutes before beginning the recording. "We do it on the fly. We show up, go over the book for a few minutes, and begin," says Kotkoskie. "Once the recording starts I try to read through without stopping. If I come to an illustration, I just describe it and then continue on with the text."

Kotkoskie grew up in a family where volunteering was considered the norm. "My uncle did a lot of volunteer work, and I grew up knowing that it was something that I would do, also," she says. It took her several years, however, to find the right niche. She first heard about the New Jersey unit of Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic in a newspaper interview with another toxicologist volunteer. "I thought if he can do that, so can I."

Before taking on something like a 500-page medical text or any book for that matter, volunteers must send an audition tape to a committee at the national organization before they are cleared to read. They are then given training. Newer readers work with a director who helps handle the recording equipment and insures that the page tones, a sound that lets the listener know it is time to turn the page, are inserted properly. Kotkoskie is now "a self director," a volunteer who is able to go into the studio alone and handle both the equipment and the reading.

Juggling the schedules of 400 volunteers, many of them working professionals, is not as difficult as it sounds, says Tony Gruenewald, assistant production director/communications coordinator for the unit, which has 12 recording studios at its site at 69 Mapleton Road. "We have people of all ages and all occupations. Our retirees who spend the winter in Florida return and help us at about the same time that the people who spend the summer in the north head out," so there is always a time slot available in the recording studio for someone who wants to volunteer.

You don't have to have the technical expertise of Kotkoskie to read at the unit, Gruenewald says. "We read books for every level from beginning readers through graduate texts." The unit does not usually read novels, which are often available on tape through the publishers. "We concentrate on textbooks and books that are not generally available on tape through other means," he says.

The unit operates essentially as an audio lending library. Members pay a first time registration of \$65 and an annual fee of \$35, and are allowed to borrow as many recording as they need throughout the year. The unit gets its books to read in a variety of ways, from members who request a book, from the national association, and from local schools whose students need a particular text.

The unit's educational outreach center also works with other organizations, such as the Dyslexia Association. "We often get calls from parents saying, 'My child has just been diagnosed with dyslexia and our school doesn't know what to do,'" Gruenewald says. In fact, while the unit's original focus was on recording books for the blind, over the years they have found that most of their requests come from people with learning disabilities. "About 70 percent of our members are dyslexic, with 20 to 25 percent blind or visually impaired. The rest have some other type of disability, such as a person with multiple sclerosis who has difficulty in handling the pages of a book."

Because of the time involved in recording a complex textbook, the member who requests it receives it a chapter or two at a time. And, says Gruenewald, the listener may hear several voices reading the book. "We just couldn't get one text read efficiently if only one person was reading it," he explains. That's why it takes a village to read a book.

50th Anniversary Gala, New Jersey unit of Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, Thursday, April 17, 6 p.m., Hyatt Regency Princeton. \$125. For reservations call 609-750-1830.