Any college student will declare getting a college degree is a tough job under the best conditions, but for one who has been totally blind since early childhood, it represents determination which is hard to equal. James K. Martin was among the 279 August candidates for degrees at Texas A&M College, and his bachelor of science degree in agricultural education proves that lack of sight is no fatal handicap in getting a college degree. And that’s not all. Martin plans to stick around at A&M to work on his master’s degree. Along with his seeing eye dog, Alita. Martin has become a familiar figure strolling about the campus between classes, yelling “howdy" in answer to greetings from passing students. He first entered A&M in 1940 after graduation from the Texas School for the Blind at Austin, majoring in pre-law, and in 1941 left to enter Law School at the University of Texas. A year later he obtained his first seeing eye dog and also decided that law was not his pot of tea. Returning to A&M in 1945 for a special course in poultry husbandry, Martin found the subject more to his liking and posted straight A’s in the courses. At the end of the school year, however, he had to drop out of college and went to his home near Weatherford to raise chickens and turkeys, got married and has two sons, ages 8 and 6. Last fall, 10 years after leaving, Martin came back for that degree. An accomplished pianist and organist, he has sat in with Hank Thompson’s band and other well-known groups during part of his period away from college. But he likes to feel his part in college activities was not too different from other students. For instance, being a “fish” back in the days when upperclassmen figured freshmen needed help in molding their character, Martin was molded along with the rest. Oddly enough, during the post-war school year, there were three other students enrolled with partial blindness, and Martin became close friends with them, along with three disabled veterans at the college. “We would work together to drive a Model A owned by one of the boys,” Martin said. “The boy that drove had a good left eye but couldn’t see out of the other, so someone with a good right eye would sit on the right side of the car and call signals. One day during a heavy snow the guy on the right mistook a telephone pole for our regular landmark and we turned in the middle of a block and ended up wrapped around a mail box. We really had fun.” He used a Braille notebook to take lecture notes during classes and transferred them to permanent notes on a typewriter at home. His wife read his lessons to him from his textbooks. “I can make out all right on my master’s degree work, if the college will just quit putting up these new buildings,” Martin grinned. “Every time I get everything located, a new building pops up and that changes it all up. Back in the old days, I could start at Mitchell hall (a dormitory) and go all over the campus. Things sure are changing.” Bryan Daily Eagle, 25 August 1957, page 6

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A TEACHER OF TEACHERS

by

William M. Kapp

[The following is reprinted from Performance , publication of the President's Committee on

Employment of the Handicapped.]

"One of my students said that I am a

legend in my own time. To me, that means

I might as well be dead. Well, I'm here to

tell you that I am not." The competitive,

tenacious manner in which this man works

proves the truth of his own feelings about

his student's expression. Completely blind

since early childhood, James K. Martin

teaches Air Force officers "how to teach."

More specifically, he trains Air Training

Command (ATC) instructors to teach

fledgling aviators all of the many subjects

these men must know in order to fly

today's sophisticated aircraft. Martin is a

Federal Civil Service employee with the

ATC Instructor Training School,

Randolph Air Force Base, Texas.

As a teacher of teachers, he helps Air

Force officers learn to prepare and follow

lesson plans, to recognize good teaching

procedures, to adapt to behavior patterns

of students so that learning difficulties can

be dealt with properly, and to

communicate verbally with their own

students. He also teaches prospective

teachers to select and manage suitable

training aids. The fact that he is so

successful in his duties is evidenced by his

superior performance awards, his

published articles in professional journals,

and the testimony of his fellow instructors

as well as his students.

Major Charles D. Burns, Chief of the

Air Training Command Instructor's

Training School, says of Mr. Martin, "His

total value as a classroom instructor is

impossible to measure against a given set

of standards. The students he has taught in

the past continue to praise him for the

inspirational gift he gave them as instructor

trainees."

Attainment of this success, though,

has not been easy. The story of the

struggles of this man and his family for the

opportunity to use his abilities is truly a

profile of courage and hard work.

Like many blind children in the

1930's, he received his early education at

the Texas State School for the Blind in

Austin. After high school he attended

Texas A&M University where he studied

pre-law. Finances, however, forced him to

leave school after two years and take a

job. The only employment opportunity

for him was with the Lighthouse for the

Blind in Ft. Worth, Texas, where he made

mops for the Navy. Using music skills

developed at the Texas State School for

the Blind, he supplemented his income by

playing the piano in dance bands in the Ft.

Worth area. Those were hard years for

Martin but they were only the first of

many he was to experience.

After World War II in 1945 he had an

opportunity under a Federal rehabilitation

program for the blind to go to Texas A&.M

University to study poultry husbandry. He

finished this training in one year and, with

the help of his family, bought a

twenty-seven-acre poultry farm near Ft.

Worth. The Federal Farm-Home

Administration helped finance the

building of a farmhouse and four brooder

houses, digging of a well, and the

preparation of the farm. The following

year lie married Nelda Stephens. Mr. and

Mrs. Martin operated their small poultry

farm, and he supplemented the family

income by working as a salesman for the

Lighthouse for the Blind in Ft. Worth, as

well as playing in a dance band. During the

years the Martins operated their farm, he

did chores in the morning and then

hitchhiked thirty-five miles to Ft. Worth

to do his sales work and play in the dance

band. The day was completed with a long

bus ride home each night.

In 1956 after several financially

disastrous years on the farm the Martins

came to realize they were just not getting

ahead. They felt their hopes lay in more

education. They sold everything they had,

cleared their debts, and went back to

Texas A&M to work on Martin's

bachelor's degree. They arrived at the

university with $250 for tuition, a promise

of a job upon graduation and two small

children to feed.

But he discovered promises are not

always kept. The job didn't materialize. At

least he had a part-time job at school and

Nelda was working in a factory. They

decided they literally had nothing to lose

by staying another year to finish a

master's degree. Once again he

supplemented the family income by

playing in dance bands. He also tuned and

repaired pianos. A graduate assistantship

helped keep the family fed.

He got his master's degree in general

education but still didn't have a job.

Although the Martins made more than 535

contacts among Federal and state

governmental agencies, all offers were

withdrawn when it was learned Martin was

blind. Finally after fifteen discouraging

months of unemployment and hardship.

Air Force officials at Randolph A.F.B. asked

if lie would like a teaching job with them.

Martin began working for Air

Training Command six weeks later. All he

needed was a chance. His success in this

position is history.

Martin has become philosophical

about his experiences "I suppose if there

is any one thing I've learned it would be

that a person probably can rarely do

exactly what he wants to do when he

wants to do it. If a handicapped person is

going to be successful, he can't just wait

for the job that is tailor-made for him to

come along. He's got to get out and do

everything he possibly can."

J. K. Martin has had many struggling

years when, in spite of his efforts, doors to

opportunity seemed locked. He

emphasizes the fact that a handicapped

person must try as best he can. But he also

firmly feels that "people who are in

positions to afford some other person a

chance, have a moral obligation to allow

that person the chance to prove his

capabilities. I don't say give the

handicapped person things free and gratis

without his making the best effort he can.

But I do say if there is a handicapped

person who wants to try to do a job, he

should at least have the chance to try it."

While most of J.K.'s goals have been

met, he would still like to finish a Ph.D. in

education. J.K. feels he not only should

improve his own professional capabilities,

but he also must continue to set an

example for his children. Perhaps the

piano and organ will once again provide

that opportunity,,

A legend in his own time? A legend

of courage, faith, and tenacity.

"Braille Monitor (September 1970)"