

# Carnegie Magazine

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## The Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

By Nancy Downes

You search through lists of book titles and consult your notes. *All My Patients are Under the Bed*—the memoirs of a New York veterinarian. That won't do. Here it is: *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. You know this patron always reads the Pulitzer Prize winners. The computer generates a mailing label for the books you've selected, and you move on to a new patron and new needs.

Eight Book Selectors at the Carnegie Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped have the unusual job of matching people with reading material. Located in Oakland at 4724 Baum Boulevard, the library loans recorded and large print books to 8,500 eligible patrons and over 300 schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and nursing homes in western Pennsylvania. "We browse for our patrons," says one selector. "They can't go to the library and see how long a book is, what kind of language it uses, or what the plot is, so we do it for them." Every three weeks, each selector chooses free books for 1400 patrons. Every day, the library's shipping staff mail out over 2500 pieces of reading material and equipment.

Carnegie Library has long been committed to providing literature to the blind. In 1911, it was one of the first public libraries in the nation to carry braille materials; today it provides materials to visually and physically handicapped people through the LBPH, which is funded by the State Library of Pennsylvania. The National Library Service of the Library of Congress provides recorded materials for circulation, playback equipment and catalogues. All LBPH services are tax-supported and free to borrowers.

In addition to large-print books, the LBPH lends disc and cassette players, and offers extension keys for patrons with limited use of their hands, amplifier/headphone combinations for those with impaired hearing, and breath-operated controls for severely handicapped users.

Patrons indicate on an initial application what services and equipment they will need, and which areas of interest appeal to them. They are asked some fairly personal questions: "Will you accept books with strong language? Explicit sex? Violence?"

Occasionally, well-intentioned family members or friends who fill out the application misjudge a patron's taste in books. A couple of years ago, an exasperated patron asked to cancel the service because



she was sick of receiving "all these inspirational books." When the selector mentioned that no other area of interest was checked on her application, the patron was amazed. "All these years!" she said. "You mean you have *other* kinds of books there? Send me *anything*!" The selector said, "She was so hungry for different types of books, she was a thrill to select for."

### Patrons and books selectors may never meet, but they share a love of books

Who are the selectors? They range in age from 28 to 42 and include a couple of former teachers, a bookstore manager, a former employee of The Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and a graduate student in library science. Their expertise ranges from foreign languages and history to gardening and the occult.

They are articulate, well-informed, and claim their heads are filled with obscure facts; it's easy to imagine them on "Jeopardy," correctly answering questions on the length of the Orinoco River or Grover Cleveland's middle name. Their occupational hazards include dreaming about book accession numbers, or unintentionally blurting out the author's name when a book is mentioned at a party. Only selectors are likely to walk past a shopping mall display of a best-seller and mentally catalogue it: "sex, strong language, violence."

Head Librarian Sue Murdock notes their other characteristics. "Well, first, they all love to read. Sometimes when I go into the lunchroom there'll be seven people in there but I won't hear a sound because everyone's reading. They really get along well. The acceptance of other people required for this job carries over into their dealings with each other." Selectors consider the "great conversations"

*Written by Aunt Nancy  
for the Carnegie  
Mellon magazine*

they have as one of the perks. As one selector says, "I can look back and see how this job has changed me more than other jobs I've had; we've had great arguments."

Selectors' have to meet certain requirements—a bachelor's degree in literature, public service experience, ability to work under pressure, and typing. But when hiring selectors, Murdock ultimately depends on instinct. "What I look for is a combination of qualities. I guess I know it when I see it."

Neala Dawson, 39, of Oakland, has been using the LBPH since graduating from high school. Legally blind, she prefers recorded books to braille materials even though, she says, tapes sometimes break at the most suspenseful point of the story. "A lot of people can't use braille," says Dawson, "Especially some elderly people who have lost feeling in their fingertips, and braille books are really heavy and bulky." The braille edition of a book like *War and Remembrance*, for example, could fill 30 volumes, while the recorded version fits in a purse.

Former teacher Gayzelle Boetticher, 84, is a lifelong reader and has been an LBPH patron for five years. She suffers from a painful arthritic condition that often keeps her up at night, and that is when she especially appreciates the books. "This service has saved my sanity," she says. "When I get low, there come the books."

James Welbourne, Assistant Director for Branch and Extension Services at Carnegie Library, would like to see the service expanded. Both he and Murdock would like to see the LBPH facility used more as a resource center and meeting place for the many handicapped organizations in western Pennsylvania. But like selectors and patrons, they're concerned about the effect of federal budget cuts on the library's service. The crucial free mailing privilege might have been eliminated a couple of years ago if there hadn't been such an uproar from patrons and spokespersons for handicapped people.

The countless notes selectors receive from patrons attest to the importance of the LBPH. One recent note said, "Thank you for bringing books back into my life." □

For more information about the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, call (412) 687-2440 in the Pittsburgh area, or toll free (800) 242-0586.

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