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Commentary

S.A.'s visually impaired get news on Owl Radio

ELAINE AYALA



The coffee is always brewing by the time I get to the Low Vision Resource Center off Loop 410 near Nacogdoches Road on Friday mornings.

A few minutes later, my reading partner Jennie Sheppard Badger arrives.

For the next half-hour, over news gossip, we cut up the pages of the San Antonio Express-News. I take the odd-numbered pages; she takes the even.

The neatly-clipped stacks add up. By 9 a.m. we're on Owl Radio, a reading service for the blind and visually impaired. Some are homebound. Owl Radio connects them to the world with a specially tuned radio it provides.

It is a labor of love for both of us.

Some of the station's volunteer readers are news junkies and would-be radio personalities. Others are teachers and retirees. Together, we deliver two hours of live radio each day from 9 to 11 a.m. The first hour consists of local, state, national and international news, as well as business and sports.

The second hour consists of commentary, obituaries and features. Owl Radio even has people who read H-E-B ads and comic strips.

Those two hours are rebroadcast from 7 to 9 p.m. each night, along with 20 other hours of syndicated programming from sources such as USA Today, the New York Times and Readers Digest. The content is delivered by both real people and synthetic, or computerized, voices.

Volunteers get thanked a lot, every time we come in. But we're the lucky ones. Not only do we have the gift of sight and of gab, I know I'm not alone in feeling privileged to connect with people on the other side of each radio.

The nonprofit center says 15,000 people in Bexar County, more in the surrounding area, have difficulty reading or are unable to read newspaper print.

Some of us have special reasons for volunteering, like Steve Sellers, who's KONO-AM morning-drive host and a ukulele recording artist (I'm not kidding).

His approach is friendly and conversational. Like the rest of us, he reads the news without editorializing. If there's any difficulty in the

job, it's in correctly pronouncing the names of foreign leaders, spies and the newest Spurs player.

Sellers' work is a tribute to his late father, F.W. Sellers, a pharmacist who "typed up thousands upon thousands" of prescription labels but later in life suffered from macular degeneration. His father always missed "that quiet time with a newspaper," he says.

That's one of the reasons Owl Radio was founded by the late Bonnie Truax, an educator and librarian who loved newspapers. She lost her sight late in life. Her friend Sally Wiskemann, who trains Owl Radio volunteers, recalled Truax didn't find out about Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez's death until several days after.

The radio reading service grew out of Truax's Low Vision Club, whose members told her they most missed reading the paper. Wiskemann says Truax "would be so impressed with what Lisa is doing."

Lisa is Lisa Miele, executive director of the Low Vision Resource Center, who says there are about 3,600 specially tuned radios in use locally. Other listeners dial-in via phone or stream the station online.

Owl Radio is one of more than 100 such stations nationwide and one of three in Texas. It uses a Texas Public Radio sub-channel and can be heard within a radius of 40 to 50 miles from TPR's Helotes tower. Owl Radio is also part of TuneIn, a free internet radio channel that can be heard bedside at three Methodist Hospitals.

Miele says Owl Radio is positioning itself to grow in different ways to serve new generations of blind and visually impaired Central Texans. It hopes to someday broadcast on cable channels.

The small nonprofit agency offers other services with only one full-time and two part-time employees. Volunteers put in about 7,400 hours a year that "help us in our mission to foster hope, offer help and promote independence for people with vision loss," Miele says.

Emily Holder, 81, who was born with congenital cataracts, has two radios at home now; one stays on at night.

"They have some very good stories from about 1:30 to 4 a.m.," she says. "I'm not always awake, but I've got it on."

Longtime listener Larry Roser tunes in at home, at his volunteer job at the American Red Cross and when he travels.

He calls in sometimes, just after Jennie and I get off the air at 10 a.m. He always thanks us profusely, and we've connected over our love of newspapers.

He also says what the folks at Owl Radio most love to hear: That listening in gives its community "a sense of independence." eyayala@express-news.net | @ElaineAyala