



Sound and vision: Radio training program benefits the blind and visually impaired

By Staff

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From a studio high above Boylston Street, a chorus of voices carry through the airwaves, promising an “auditory journey” rife with breaking news, book reviews and interviews with the experts of the day. The voices are smooth, the editing flawless and the content engaging, but the people behind the mikes are hardly professionals. They are the four blind or visually impaired students who make up the first class of VOICE, or Vocational Opportunities in Communication Education.

The groundbreaking program, launched in September by the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind and Marshfield-based Talking Information Center, used federal stimulus money to purchase broadcasting equipment for use by the visually impaired.

Clocks and labels are super-sized, the switchboard is organized with the blind in mind, and the digital editing software can be used without seeing the screen. A small alcove in the corner holds a blanket and a dog bone, offering temporary respite for a student’s guide dog.

Gaining confidence

With instructor Jay Rufo at the helm, the program offers an avenue for students who have the education – but not the real-life training – to enter the job market.

Now in week 11 of 12, the novice disc jockeys have mastered the technical aspects of radio, but they have also gained the confidence to break into fields they previously considered off-limits, said Massachusetts Commissioner Janet LaBrec.

“They are being innovative, they are outgoing, and they are no longer questioning whether they can get here,” LaBrec said.

When creating VOICE, LaBrec worked closely with longtime collaborator Ron Bersani, executive director of the Talking Information Center, to develop a curriculum that bolsters students’ confidence in broadcasting but also “diminishes the isolation” felt by many blind people entering the job market.

That’s the goal of the program, said Bersani, a Marshfield resident who has helped run Talking Information Center, a radio reading service, for more than three decades.

“If they all end up radio personalities, that’s great,” he said. “But the goal of the program is to build self-

confidence and to learn skills. If they can master this equipment, they can do anything.”

The refurbished sound studio is named after Bersani in recognition of his efforts to bring the program to fruition.

That message has reached the four students loud and clear. Ranging in age from 20 to 56, and with backgrounds from theater to a former taxi driver, they will all finish next week with goals they thought were impossible before VOICE.

“It wasn’t something I thought I could do before,” said Katie Crocker, a Wareham resident who spends five hours commuting to and from Boston each day with her service dog, Traveler.

“In a way I think this was life-changing,” said Crocker, 24. “I didn’t think I could do this before, but it has really broadened my scope for employment.”

Throughout the course, the students have traveled to the State House to report on White Cane Safety Day, interviewed doctors and politicians, and reported on new opportunities in sports and music for the blind community.

Fellow student Mike Gionet, 30, of Brockton recently graduated from Bridgewater State

University with Crocker. Both had dreams of entering the communications field, but no way of breaking in.

“It’s one thing to learn it in a classroom and another to be doing it,” Gionet said. “I just was never presented with that opportunity before.”

For Corey O’Rourke, a 22-year-old improv performer with the easy wit of a seasoned disc jockey, the program provides technical skills and a sense of community.

“I spent my entire life resisting help and never asking for it,” said O’Rourke, of Cambridge. Before the program, he had never met another blind person.

“I just wanted to be normal,” he said. “I didn’t want people to know. Being here, I’ve learned a lot.”

Career change

The program’s vocational training might benefit its oldest student, Kinski Duah of Dorchester, the most. Duah supported himself by driving a taxi after he emigrated from Ghana in 1980.

When a doctor told him he was losing his sight to glaucoma, he went to the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind to find another path and was selected for the program.

Now the 56-year-old has dreams of returning to Africa to set up a radio station of his own.

The next 12-week session will begin in early February, and the four graduates from the founding class will likely enter the commission’s nationally renowned internship program, which places visually impaired clients with employers across the state.

Their success is proof that the program can change the way the visually impaired are viewed by potential employers, LaBrec said.

“If one person who goes through this program is placed in a competitive job who could not have been before, the program has paid for itself,” she said. “They will be self-sufficient, and the return on that investment is enormous.”

For Bersani, who helped found the Talking Information Center in 1978, adding the educational aspect to the organization’s repertoire changes everything.

“We’ve done some amazing things in 32 years, but I think this is what I’m most proud of,” he said.

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