

# LEARNING SKILLS, GAINING FREEDOM

## New program trains blind for work in the communication industry



*Article taken from Quincy Patriot  
Ledger, October 16, 2010*

**By Julia Spitz/Daily News staff**

Voices in the dark have been shining light across the state for 33 years.

A joint venture from the [Massachusetts Commission for the Blind](#) and the Talking Information Center network aims to extend the light's scope through a VOICE, Vocational Opportunities in Communication Education, in Boston.

"It's a pretty intense, interactive program," said Ron Bersani, the executive director of the Marshfield-based Talking Information Center radio reading service for the blind and visually impaired.

The program is also a first, said Paulette Song, a spokeswoman for the state's Health and Human Services department, in an e-mail.

Developed by Janet LaBreck, commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, the VOICE program is "the first in the nation to utilize this collaborative effort involving radio reading service to address job-building skills through the communication field for blind and visually impaired" persons of employment age.

Students learn on-air presentation, program production, digital editing and news editing. They also receive training in skills that carry over to most any line of work, said Bersani: time management, resume writing, interview techniques and organizational skills.

While not all participants will go on to broadcasting fame and glory, "If they can master the equipment, it will build self-confidence and self-esteem," said Bersani, and give them a chance to put a dent in the state's estimated 70 percent unemployment rate among blind and visually impaired residents of working age.

A bonus for Bersani, and the more than 25,000 people who listen to programs broadcast through the Talking Information Center network, is "the interns who go through the (VOICE) program will be producing content that we will use on the air."

The reading radio lineup, which runs 24 hours a day and is carried locally by Framingham State's radio station on a closed-circuit signal, includes readings from the MetroWest Daily News, Patriot Ledger, Boston Globe, Boston Herald, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and New

York Times newspapers, and magazines such as Cosmo, Oprah, People, Rolling Stone, Smithsonian and Yankee and Cosmo.

Listeners can hear programming through special radio receivers tuned to the subcarrier frequency of local FM stations, audio systems on some areas' cable TV stations, or through TIC's website, [ticnetwork.com](http://ticnetwork.com).

There are about 700 volunteer readers across the state, said Bersani, but readings are no longer recorded at Framingham State.

Bersani began his association with the Marshfield reading radio network in 1977, when the organization was in its infancy and he was an English teacher at Marshfield High.

"Being someone who loves to read, I can't imagine not being able to pick up a book or newspaper," he said.

He still pitches in with reading if a volunteer isn't available but was glad he wasn't pressed into service on Tuesday morning.

"The absolute, positive cardinal sin is you can't editorialize" when reading the news, he said. If you're a Yankees fan or a Sox fan, you can't let your feelings creep into a game story. If you've got strong feelings about President Obama, you've got to keep the tone of your voice in check when reading an editorial. "You're just there to report."

Tuesday's story about a woman charged with her fifth drunken driving offense, after rear-ending the unmarked car of the state police commander, would have been especially tough for

Bersani to read without letting his feelings come through.

"A fifth-time drunk driver. Thankfully, I did not have to read that one on the air," said the grandfather of Melanie Powell, who was killed by a drunken driver and in whose memory Melanie's Law was passed to strengthen the state's OUI penalties.

Bersani is proud of the network's ability to give those without sight a wide range of news and remembers being surprised by one feature 'I thought, 'Oh, no. This is deadly' " when it launched. Before the reading of the weekly supermarket circular was finished, however, he received a call that changed his mind.

"My husband reads it to me," said the caller, "but he only reads what he wants me to buy. Now I can do my own shopping."

Independence is the core mission for the Talking Information Center, as well as for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind.

Independence is also the heart and soul of the new VOICE in town.

VOICE will host an open house at the Boston office of the Commission for the Blind, 48 Boylston St., this Tuesday from noon to 5 p.m. More information is available by calling 1-800-392-6450, ext. 7491.

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