

# WISCONSIN BRAILLE

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Summer 2019

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## Wisconsin Braille Celebrates 20 Years

2019 marks the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of Wisconsin Braille Inc. in 1999. Connie Risjord, Mary Ann Damm, Bev Pfister and Susan Christenson, all members of the National Braille Association at that time, envisioned a state-wide organization that would include as members not only braille transcribers, but also teachers and parents of the visually impaired...anyone interested in the promotion of braille literacy in Wisconsin. Their efforts culminated in the establishment of Wisconsin Braille, which held its first annual meeting at the Holiday Inn East in Madison on February 25, 1999.

As stated in its Constitution and Bylaws, "the purpose of Wisconsin Braille is to advance communication and coordinate the efforts of all persons concerned with the availability, quality, and distribution of brailled materials in the state of Wisconsin thereby encouraging braille literacy." Wisconsin Braille was formally incorporated as a non-profit organization in June of 2000.

Wisconsin Braille has made consistent efforts over the past 20 years to meet the demands of its mission statement. Board members have always included transcribers, teachers of the visually impaired, braille readers, school administrators and parents of the blind.

A newsletter is published three times a year which incorporates articles of interest to this audience. These have included information about changes in the braille code, developments in braille technology for the visually impaired, a recurring article for transcribers called The Braille Corner, articles about educational events for teachers and parents, summaries of Board meetings, and our annual Special Book Project.

Over time, Wisconsin Braille has been a participant at conferences whose focus is either braille production or braille education. Its very first annual membership meeting was held in conjunction with the 1999 Wisconsin Vision and Orientation and Mobility Annual Teachers' Conference in Madison. Most recently in May of this year, a member of the Wisconsin Braille Board participated in DPI's Annual Family Conference for parents of the visually impaired in Green Bay, teaching them about braille books for beginning readers.

From its first year as an organization, Wisconsin Braille has produced braille books for children, offered free-of-charge to customers. Over time, this effort became known as the Special Book Project which is now funded with grant money from the Glen Stacey Fund. The Project's committee chooses quality children's books in the spring of each year for production by the brailleists at the Oshkosh State Correctional Institution. To date, this project has produced over 6,000 books for Wisconsin's blind children!

Since the start of the Special Book Project, Wisconsin Braille has proudly collaborated with the Braille Production services located at the Oshkosh State Correctional Institution. The transcribers there were initially trained by the same four NBA members who founded Wisconsin Braille. Now a thriving braille production unit with sixteen active brailleists trained in formatting, math, chemistry, and music, all under the able leadership of Kurt Pamperin (who is also a certified transcriber), the production of Wisconsin Braille's Special Book Project continues to be accurately transcribed in the recently-adopted UEB code.

So as current members of Wisconsin Braille celebrate 20 years, we encourage others to join our organization. Membership forms are always included in each newsletter and can also be accessed on our website, [www.wisbrl.org](http://www.wisbrl.org).

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### Book Review

*Unblinded: One Man's Courageous Journey Through Darkness to Sight* by Traci Medford-Rosow with Kevin Coughlin  
Reader's Favorite Five Star Award  
Gold Winner at the New England Book Festival

This book is the true story of a man in his 30s, Kevin Coughlin, who loses his sight due to a rare genetic disorder -- Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy. The onset of his blindness took only five days, and he lived as a totally blind individual for almost twenty years. At about year 16, with no medical intervention, Kevin's sight starts to return. It very gradually improves, and the reader learns of the improvement through excerpts in his journal. He is the only known person in the world who has experienced a spontaneous, non-medically assisted, regeneration of the optic nerve. Kevin inspired a CNN news story chronicling his experience living as a blind person in New York City which was instrumental in establishing its first blind advocacy program there. Other news stories appeared on CBS, NBC and in the New York Times.

This book includes Kevin's experiences with the difficulties of getting help as an adventitiously blinded individual. He has to wait to be included in a support group; he has to wait for orientation and mobility lessons; he has to wait to be on

the list for a guide dog. He is so persistent, and uses his training so well, that he is able to travel in New York City, but he continues to drink too heavily. His real "awakening" seems to be his going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and finding his spirituality.

The author, Traci Medford-Rosow donates all the proceeds from this book to the Mitochondrial Disease Foundation. This book is available in print, and as an audio book.

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## **Finding Braille Cells in a Prison Cell**

By Johnny R. Lee

[Editor's Note: The four women mentioned below are the original founders of Wisconsin Braille, Inc.][This article is reprinted from our Winter 2001 newsletter.]

In the spring of 1997, four Wisconsin transcribers met with a representative from the Oshkosh Correctional Institution (OSCI) and agreed to start a course in the literary braille there. Beverly Pfister and Mary Ann Damm, at that time both board members of the National Braille Association, would share the teaching duties. Susan Christensen, a beta tester for Megadots, would be the technology consultant and grader. Connie Risjord, a co-author of the teaching manual for the Library of Congress, would supply the lessons and immediately start teaching braille to David Hines, the program director, so that he would have a clear understanding of what would be expected of students. Dave would begin screening candidates for the course; teaching of students would commence in fall.

September is usually a bad month for me. For example, I was supposed to be born in September of '67, but I came in July. I was arrested in September. I went to the hole, in two different years, in September. Well, In September of '97 that sort of changed. At that time I was incarcerated at OSCI. I had been working as the lead cook in the institution kitchen, cooking two meal daily for 2200 inmates and staff. I had been doing it too long. I was irritable and became angry over the smallest thing. I needed a change. I was taught in treatment that "change is good." It was around this time that I read an announcement in the Daily Bulletin (the institution information sheet) about a braille class.

I sent an interview request form to Dave Hines. The first day of class we were introduced to Susan, Bev, Mary Ann, Connie--and the Capital Perkins braillewriter. I was beginning to wonder if this September was going to be any different than any other. We were asked why we wanted to take the course. I responded that I wanted to learn something new, and because my mom was blind. We were given our schedule for classes and labs. I questioned myself and the negative thoughts set in. Why am I doing this? Am I going to finish? Will I fail this too? Why take a pay cut of 19 cents? Hey, in prison 19 cents is 19 cents. I was reassured when I talked to my mom that I could learn a skill that could benefit others. Why are moms always right?

Learning braille was like learning a new language. It was not going to be easy. We had to redo lessons if not done right, and then redo the redos. We brought that "finished" drills or lessons in on Wednesday after toiling all week with braille, proofreading, having someone else proofread, proofreading someone else's and doing supplements. We did one lesson so much I knew the sentences by heart. But we were not doing well. Susan had about had it with us. At one point she wrote and said it took her hours to correct our errors. I wondered what possessed

these women to keep coming into an institution with what appeared to be stupid men.

We did what seemed like a thousand lessons on the Perkins, I should be thankful it wasn't the slate and stylus. Then we graduated to Megadots, a program that allowed us to braille on a computer. Well it had been awhile since I had used a computer, so there was another challenge. But before too long we were moving right along in the world of cells and dots and learning about all the rules and the exceptions to the rules. One of my favorite things was when the ladies would discuss a rule. It would be like "that's not the way I understand that." Or, "no it's not done that way, it's this way." Or, "are you sure?"

When my brother died, in January of '98, it seemed as if the world had fallen around me. I had come to enjoy braille, my cellie was kind of learning it along with me, at least enough to help me proofread my lessons. But I wondered, how can I go through this grief and endure these women insisting that I proofread? I don't know about you but I can't just proofread. I have to have music on or something. I wrote poems when I was supposed to be proofreading. But Mary Ann, Bev and Susan kept me busy during this time. They were so supportive. Braille and proofreading became my solace. My escape if you will, and I had an excuse to stay in my room. My cellie ended up being transferred out of state. I dreamed of braille dots and cells and rules—and exceptions to those rules. But the braille life continued.

On April 1<sup>st</sup> 1998, we walked into the Braille Room and on the desk were the old Perkins braillewriters—they had returned. If you want to scare a tough group of convicted braillists put the Perkins on their desk. Bev was there with a letter from Maxine Dorf of the Library of Congress stating that we had to go back to the Perkins and do 50 pages on it for our trial manuscript. It looked legal to us. How were we to know that Dorf had retired years ago? Then it said for further instruction see the next page...on that page were the words "April fools." Well Bev had pulled one on the cons. It was this kind of fun that kept us going and not giving up. Even though braille is serious you have to be a little whacked to get through.

We had midterms; this was to test our knowledge of the rules. I can proudly say I made a 100 on it. I hope they weren't grading on a curve.

The Wisconsin prison system had been sending inmates to other states. I was put on the list to go. The negative self-talk talk came back. I get this far and I still won't be able to finish! Why even continue? I guess Dave and others pulled for me, because I was taken off the list until I finished my manuscript.

I had chosen *Paradise* by Tony Morrison for my certification manuscript. It was a new book and I liked it. Well I submitted it, after toiling with it forever. I had proofread into all hours of the night (I was in a single room by then), made

correction after correction, proofreading on top of proofreading. I thought it was perfect...Well it was not even close to perfect. I felt so bad, because I had failed again. I had let everyone down—Dave, the ladies, and especially myself. I had set my sights too high again and as always, I failed.

During the time I awaiting the results, Dave and Mary Ann kept us busy producing books for *WISBRL* Special Book Project. I brailled *When Hippo Was Hairy and other African Stories*. I enjoyed it and my skills improved. I learned how to format more complicated books (sometimes the hard way), and life continued. When I got the bad news about my manuscript I volunteered to go out of state. Meanwhile I started working on my second manuscript. I brailled 35 pages, worked on it, proofread, corrected it several times, and said, "it's done." It was sent to Washington, and as I awaited the results, I did workbooks for a third grade homeschooler and learned how to do textbooks. Then one day Dave called me into his office, and said, "what am I going to do with you?" I asked, "what did I do now?" I knew he had gotten the manuscript back, and I was ready to go out of state again. I was tired of trying. Who was I trying to kid? All those questions kept coming back. Then he handed me the letter, and I had *passed!* I had accomplished something. I was now a Certified Braille Transcriber. On August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1999, I had completed the OSCI Braille Program.

I had a set back, and went to the hole, you guessed it, in September, but I kept my head up. The negative voices came, but I knew I could make it. I passed the braille manuscript. Bev had said that braille would be something that can never be taken from us. The end result of this is that Dave took me back, because I was needed, not necessarily because he wanted to. I finished my stay at OSCI.

In July of 2000 I was released to Ashland, and could not find a job. My sister asked me to move to Madison, so I did, in September (of all months). On October 9<sup>th</sup> I got a job through the Community Corrections Employment Program working as a braille transcriber for John Boyer at Computers to Help People, Inc. I am now the operations manager there. I enjoy working there. I enjoy doing braille. Will I certify in Nemeth or Music? I don't know at this point—but I know one thing if I do, I will be successful because I have braille support from people I had met over the last few years. For that I am truly thankful.

I thank John for giving me the chance to prove myself. Because four ladies named Susan, Bev, Mary Ann and Connie, and a man named Dave cared enough to teach inmates braille I learned I can do it! I can make it! I don't fail at all I do! I can be and will be *successful!* Yes, I am a convicted felon. Yes, I did time in prison. Yes, I have parole and probation to do. Yes, prison is a negative experience, but I took something positive from it. No matter what you face in life, you too can make it.

I think I speak for all the guys who took the braille course with me, Randy, Al, Todd, Patrick, Dennis, Ken, Don and Tim, in "Thank You Ladies and Dave!" Also thanks to the institution for allowing the volunteers to go in and teach braille.

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## **A New Board to Carry Wisconsin Braille Into Its 21<sup>st</sup> Year**

Sandy Adams, President

Leanne Dieck, Vice President

Cindy Collins, Secretary

Linda Bailey, Treasurer

Directors: David Grulke, Kevin Jones, Faith Kelley, Alison McKee, Kurt Pamperin, Connie Risjord, Judith Sherry.

## **Thank You to Recent Outgoing Board Members**

Wisconsin Braille thanks recent board members, who have served within the last five years, for their service to our mission of promoting braille literacy here in Wisconsin:

Katie Corbett: Braille user

Mary Ann Damm: Founding Member and our Treasurer for many years

Dennis Helwig: President and transcriber

Angela Memmel: parent

Vicki Warren: Teacher of the Visually Impaired

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## **Celebrating Twenty Years of Service to Wisconsin Braille**

Those of us who sit around the board meeting tables to do the work of Wisconsin Braille may think we are a small organization with a big mission. In actuality, we are quite large. Looking at the list of individuals who have served on our boards over the past twenty years we are: founders, parents, transcribers, TVIs and users. We represent all regions of the state. In common, whether we are "veterans" or "explorers" in the world of braille, we are passionate about braille literacy. Thank you to the many who have served our "small" organization fulfill its large mission. (If you have served and do not find your name on this list, please excuse the omission, and contact WisBrl so that we may correct this listing.)

Presidents:

Sandy Adams

Mary Ann Damm

Dennis Helwig

Vonna Johnson-Porter

Connie Risjord

Vice Presidents:

Sandy Adams

John Boyer

Leannette Dieck

Marilyn Harmon

David Hines

Vonna Johnson-Porter

Marilyn Lundgren

Treasurers:

Linda Bailey

Mary Ann Damm

Pat Foltz

Beverly Pfister

Secretaries:

Kathleen Belongia

Cindy Collins

Vonna Johnson-Porter

Dawn Soto

Jennifer Wenzel

Rebecca Williams

Directors:

Sandy Adams

Barb Altheon

David Ballman

Kathleen Belongia

Betsy Binney-Gruba

John Boyer

Paula Chester

Katherine Watson Corbett

Leannette Dieck

Carolyn Fletcher  
Pat Foltz  
David Grulke  
Marilyn Harmon  
Beverly Helland  
Dennis Helwig  
Patricia Herrling  
David Hines  
Sue Jenson  
Kevin Jones  
Barb Jopke  
Faith Kelley  
Carolyn Fletcher  
Alison McKee  
Cheryl Orgas  
Kurt Pamperin  
Beverly Pfister  
Vonna Johnson-Porter  
Connie Risjord  
Ann Schroeder  
Judith Sherry  
Dawn Soto  
Julie Stroh  
Kelsey Strohm  
Julie Sumwalt  
Guadalupe Torrijos  
Judy Turner (Turner-Kilian)  
Vicki Warren  
Becky Williams  
Gail Yu

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## The Braille Corner

Dear Ms. Perkins,

I'm thinking that I would like to become a braille transcriber. Is it hard? How long does it take? Are there any educational requirements or prerequisites?

Wondering

Dear Wondering,

This is a difficult question to answer; what may be easy for one person can be difficult for another. Compare it to learning a foreign language or learning to play the piano. Since the course is usually taken via correspondence the length of time it takes to become a certified transcriber is really up to the student, but most people finish the basic course in about a year.

There are, in my opinion, five critical elements that go into the making of a good braille transcriber:

- Intelligence
- Education
- Empathy
- Respect
- Logical reasoning

*Intelligence:* You need to be smart enough to know that you don't know everything. Simply passing the basic literary braille course is not enough. You must be willing to devote time and effort to continuous learning. And, you must be smart enough to know that you cannot leave decision-making to a computer and a translation program. There are decisions that you will be called upon to make, and you must be prepared and confident enough to make them.

*Education:* You must have a high school diploma or equivalent. More is better. A good background in English grammar and honed writing skills will be assets as you learn and produce braille, for you will need to be able to write clear, concise notes to the braille reader that are free of grammatical and punctuation errors.

*Empathy:* You must learn to "think blind" and have empathy for the braille reader who cannot see a whole page at once and cannot anticipate what is coming next.

*Respect:* You need to show your respect for authors and publishers by replicating their work as faithfully as possible. A transcriber must avoid "tidying up" a volume. Authors and publishers have their own reasons for doing things, and we must respect that and stay as true to print as possible.

*Logical reasoning:* In other words, good ol' common sense. Transcribing is not a cut-and-dried operation. There is not a rule for every possible situation that arises in print – especially as books become more and more graphic. Being able to look at material in a logical way, prioritizing and organizing so that it will make sense to the reader is the essence of braille transcribing.

Braille transcribing is rarely dull, and often challenging. Come join us.

Sincerely,  
Ms. Perkins

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Contributors to this issue are:

Sandy Adams, Cindy Collins, Johnny Lee, Alison McKee

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Please Join Us

Next Wisconsin Braille Meeting

(As always our meetings are open to the public)

**When:** August 5, 2019

**Where:** Braille Library and Transcription Service

6501 Watts Rd., Suite 149

Madison

**Time:** 10:00 a.m. to 1:00

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If you are interested in joining Wisconsin Braille, or have not paid your membership this year, please be sure to complete the membership form at the back of this newsletter and mail it to the address listed.

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The WISCONSIN BRAILLE newsletter is published three times a year.

Deadlines are: Spring/Summer – April 15, Fall – August 15, Winter – December 15

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This version of the Wisconsin Braille newsletter was prepared by the members of the OSCI Braille Program. It has not been proofread. Readers are encouraged to report noted errors to: Wisconsin Braille Newsletter, Editor, 5745 Bittersweet Place, Madison, WI 53705.