

Cape May County Herald

Column: NJ Observes Blindness Awareness Month

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It was a young boy, Louis Braille, born 200 years ago this year, who, at age 12 created a code which became a method of learning and reading for blind students. With six raised dots arranged in different patterns, he developed a system of producing numbers, letters and words that is still used worldwide on a daily basis. In 1829, he published the first Braille book and eight years later added symbols for music and math to his system. By 1868, Braille was widely accepted and today is globally recognized as the standard by both the blind and the sighted.

To better appreciate the contribution of the Braille system, consider that today most printed material is usually published in either 10 or 12-point fonts (i.e., 6 or 7 characters per linear inch). This size print is usually no problem for people who have at least corrected 20/20 vision, but is completely inaccessible to those who are severely visually impaired or have no vision at all. Though the ADA requires a minimum font size of 14 point, a legally blind person may only be able to read font sizes starting at 18 point (four characters per inch). At some point (36 point+), the volume of paper required to hold such very large print makes a printed document next to unusable. And, of course, for an individual with no vision, any size print is inaccessible.

Though still the universal written language of the blind, for various reasons Braille literacy seems to be decreasing in the United States. Faced with this challenge, its many advocates are unrelenting in their efforts to preserve and increase its use. Their belief in the importance of Braille skills to the success and independence of the blind and visually impaired seems to be borne out by statistics. According to Adam Szczepaniak, the director of the New Jersey State Library for the Blind and Handicapped, while 85 percent of blind people with Braille skills are employed, 70 percent of those without Braille skills are unemployed. Statistics such as these are pretty powerful proof of the impact of young Louis Braille's almost 200-year-old system.

It was another young boy, Rocco Fiorentino, born blind 13 years ago in New Jersey, who inspired his family to establish The Little Rock Foundation (www.tlrf.org), an organization that supports blind and visually impaired children within our community. This family-run non-profit supports Resource Centers at Wills Eye Hospital and at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, a free day camp in Medford, a college scholarship program, and a youth board that strives to educate community leaders on the needs of blind and visually impaired youth.

Rocco himself has taken an active leadership role in educating New Jersey legislators on the importance of Braille literacy for blind children. Through his lobbying efforts, the NJ State Legislature allocated an additional \$1.2 million to the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired for increased Braille instruction and the addition of 12 vision teachers. This young boy's compelling presence and the supportive efforts of his family also have persuaded Gov. Corzine to sign into law a resolution designating October of each year as Blindness Awareness Month in New Jersey.