

Bringing Tech, Teens, and Talent Together

Recording Audiobooks for Children with Disabilities

LYNN VROBLICK



Sam and Isaac (top photo) monitor a recording and Piper (bottom photo) records an audiobook in the recording studio.

It's Friday afternoon and, rather than embarking on weekend recreational plans, a group of high school students have arrived at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (LBPH) to get down to work. They filter into the library's recording studio and two students take their places at the microphones in soundproof recording booths, while others settle in front of the electronic monitoring equipment just outside and follow the text of the children's book that is being recorded.

The teens are from the Barack Obama Academy of International Studies in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood. They are participating in an innovative project in which they apply their talents to create audiobooks in an accessible format for an underserved population, children with visual, physical, or reading disabilities who are unable to read standard sized print.

By producing recorded books for young children, LBPH is supplementing the collection of the National Library Service (NLS), a division of the Library of Congress. The books are made available statewide, nationally, and internationally through NLS.

One of the teens, Piper Walsh, says, "It's nice because all week I'm involved with my own work, but then I can step back and do something that's not for me personally, that helps other people. It's a good way to end the week."

The students narrate, monitor (follow narration electronically), and digitally edit the books, a complicated and exacting process that follows narration. Mark Sachon, LBPH's volunteer coordinator and recording studio manager, compares the freshly recorded books to "uncut, unpolished diamonds" requiring small but important corrections, such as the removal of unwanted breaths and other extraneous sounds through editing. "There's a lengthy editing process, then the students do retakes, and the books are reviewed by at least two reader-patrons for quality assurance before being circulated," Sachon said.

He says the program enriches all the participants and especially "benefits young library patrons because it provides them with books that they wouldn't otherwise have, in an accessible format. When they're released, we're confident they'll have a wide circulation."



Lynn Vroblick has worked at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped for over thirteen years and is currently a Reader Advisor. In this role, she enjoys assisting patrons of all ages throughout Pennsylvania in book selection, so that they can access the topics and authors that interest them.

Library Honored as Network Library of the Year

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped was recently honored as the national Network Library of the Year by the National Library Service of the Library of Congress. The library provides, for free, more than 85,000 digital audiobook titles (by mail or download), digital players, 14,000 large-print books, Playaways, and described videos to 15,000 Pennsylvania residents, as well as free access to Bookshare. (Described video is the narrated description of a program's nonverbal elements that may include surroundings, costumes, and body language. The description is added during pauses in dialogue and enables people to form a mental picture of what is happening in the program. It may use a separate audio track added to the program after the program has been completed.)

Recognized for its creative and innovative programming, it offers tech training to patrons in person and over the phone, and a statewide virtual storytime via conference call for children who are blind or have limited vision. Its children's programs also include Tactile and Braille Early Literacy Kits (which include tips on the five Every Child Ready to Read early literacy practices for parents) and in-house playgroups facilitated by Children's Specialist Briana Albright and TEIS (Therapeutic Early Intervention Services) teachers for children with multiple disabilities. The library has presented two tactile art shows titled Somatosensory at <https://vimeo.com/254136113/a5cbf12257>.

Mark Lee, library service administrator of LBPH says, "By working to make books accessible to print disabled children, these Pittsburgh Public Schools teens increase their awareness of accessibility issues and, along the way, have a positive experience that they can put on their college applications."

Melissa Dodge, a retired English and French teacher who supervises the students, says, "I enjoy seeing their reactions of surprise, joy, and pride in the outcome of their work, and I am touched by their respect for people who have disabilities."

To set up the program, Russ Kuba, LBPH accessible technology specialist, reached out to his contacts at the Pittsburgh Public Schools. That culminated in a presentation to a large group of interested students, in which the challenges and rewards of narration were explained. The project took off from there.

The students take risks. With encouragement and critical feedback, two teens overcame initial difficulties enunciating through practice and focus. In the process, they gained confidence and produced flawless recordings.



Many of the books are in Spanish-English bilingual format, including a series by Mary Austen.

Choosing the books to record is collaborative, with input from Briana Albright, LBPH children's specialist, supervisor Dodge, and the students. It's a democratic process, with two-way communication.

When several students observed that there were fewer books with female protagonists, more books celebrating women and girls were included. The recorded books, both fiction and nonfiction, often highlight notable figures like Rachel Carson (*Rachel Carson and Her Book That Changed the World* by Laurie Lawler, 2012) and Ruth Bader Ginsburg (*Ruth Bader Ginsburg: The Case of R.B.G. vs. Inequality* by Jonah Winter, 2017). Winter's book, for grades three through six, puts forward fact after fact describing Ginsburg's experiences from girlhood through law school and later as a lawyer and judge, as if in a courtroom setting, with the reader as the jury rendering a verdict on her life.

Obama Academy junior Sam Bisno reflects about his experiences saying, "I believe reading is just about the best thing in the world, so the fact that I get to help others have that experience is rewarding to me. But reading out loud is hard! I often stop myself and force myself to do a retake because I didn't like the way something sounded."

He continues, "The most challenging book I've done is *Iconoscope*, an anthology of poems by Peter Oresick. The poems are extremely personal and that really required me to put myself in the author's shoes to try to bring nuance to each poem."

Daevan Mangalmurti, who narrated *Amma, Tell Me about Holi!*, says he recognizes "how much of a privilege it is to have literature written for people whose eyes can capture everything on a page and how important it is to make sure that the blind have equal access to literature."

One of Sachon's favorite recordings is the award-winning *Looking Like Me* by Walter Dean Myers. As narrated by sophomore Guillermo Harris, the book is lyrical and rhythmic. Its protagonist is a young African American boy growing up in an urban setting, but it has a universal appeal. It's about the complexity of identity; the boy realizes his personality is faceted and he has many strengths, and Sachon says it "is read with enthusiasm and delight, like a parent would read to their child."

The entire student recording program works on multiple levels and is reciprocal. It builds the library's collection and benefits the disability community, and in the process, both the teens themselves, as well as the young library patrons, learn, have fun, and grow. Together the student team has produced more than seventy-five recorded titles that would otherwise not have

been available to print-disabled users. In the process they learn real twenty-first-century skills including public speaking, use of computer hardware and the library's Hindenburg recording software, basic reading skills, the creative process, commitment and perseverance, and—perhaps in today's society the most important quality of all—empathy for others. &

Doing Día

Thanks to our readers, here is a look at a few Día celebrations of the past.

Amalia E. Butler, senior children's librarian, Maplewood (NJ) Memorial Library

In 2018, we focused on our youngest patrons beyond the regularly scheduled storytimes. The week was filled with special early literacy activities, including puzzle making, a guest dance program for caregivers and children, a collaborative preschool art project, and an early Día program. The library is in a commuter town, so children are often accompanied to programs by their babysitters, nannies, au pairs, and grandparents during the day. A large number of the caregivers are multilingual and represent a wide variety of cultures. With this in mind, the program was planned as a celebration of families, inviting attendees to share their favorite childhood songs with the group between stories. Since then, storytime planning has become more intentional and focused on using more picturebooks and short narrative biographies that feature diverse characters, as well as nonfiction with photographs of real people.

In 2019, a few weeks prior to our celebration, I began to share information during weekly storytimes and approached caregivers individually to ask about their favorite childhood songs. In this way, the song lyrics, melodies, and hand motions could be learned ahead of time. We created a YouTube video playlist that featured the songs and fingerplays with subtitles, to encourage attendee participation. The videos also featured native-language speakers in addition to those in attendance. I shared bilingual and multicultural stories as well as rhymes, fingerplays, and songs in Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Tagalog, which continue to be used in storytimes throughout the year. A fortuitous partnership with an au pair named Estefany allowed her, as part of her cultural exchange educational program, to share an interactive lesson on the history and culture of Peru.

Christy Estrovitz, manager of youth services, San Francisco Public Library

Día has earned a special place in San Francisco, bringing joy to the heart of the Mission District, nexus of the Hispanic/Latino community, on the last Sunday in April.



Celebrated since 1999 and acknowledged by an official city proclamation, Día has weathered many changes over the past twenty years, but has remained dedicated to building home libraries and spreading the love of reading. Día first took place in Dolores Park, but when the park closed for renovations Día continued thanks to the organizing committee and unwavering support from the leadership at San Francisco Public Library (SFPL), who also rallied to keep it going. When the renovated Dolores Park reopened without a landing place for Día, the Mission Library, in conjunction with Sunday Streets (a popular street festival), sought to find a new home for this beloved celebration.

SFPL pitched the idea to the SF Early Literacy Network, a collaborative of local nonprofits serving young children and families. With mission alignment, each member immediately stepped up to lead an activity, donate books, and join the organizing committee. The response was truly amazing on every level. Families flocked to the event to celebrate Día's return to the Mission.

The following year, SFPL leveraged its role as a city agency to bring Día to Parque Niños Unidos. This special park felt more akin to the spirit of children, justice, and opportunity, qualities Día imbues. This sunny, triangular-shaped park started out as an underutilized lot that the community petitioned to transform into a park for children. It is here that Día, thanks to leadership support from SFPL and their ability to leverage city resources along with community agencies, has been allowed to grow and flourish.

Last year, Día marked its twentieth anniversary with more than 1,200 participants and twenty community organizations providing literacy-based activities. &