

Library machine helps visually impaired read

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

Imagine being read to by Perfect Paul, Frail Frank or Uppity Ursula.

If you're visually impaired you'll have a chance to be read to by any of these three voices plus six others, such as Whispering Wendy, Rough Rita or Kilt the Kid.

The voices aren't real people. They are synthetic voices on a Kurzweil Reading Machine that essentially eliminates the middle man — someone to record on to braille or to type in large print for visually impaired people.

The Farmington Community Library now has a Kurzweil machine of its own available for anyone who is visually impaired.

"The Kurzweil Reading Machine brings even greater independence because it can immediately read aloud any works typewritten or typeset," said library director Beverly Papai.

Through a federal Library Services and Construction Act grant, administered by the Library of Michigan, the Farmington Community Library bought one of the machines for about \$10,000.

"That cost is less than a new car. For the visually impaired person, the Kurzweil can bring the sense of independence that a car represents," Papai said.

PAPAI FIRST met Raymond Kurzweil — the machine's inventor — in the mid-1970s at an American

Library Association Conference. At that time, his machine was the size of a large Xerox machine and the synthetic voice was a monotone. The price tag was \$42,000.

"Everyone who saw the demonstration felt it was magic," Papai added.

The Kurzweil is sort of like a Xerox machine but no where near its size. Today the machine is small enough to fit under an airplane seat.

The machine takes a copy of the printed materials. And it's not limited to books or magazines. Visually impaired people can bring in their bills or correspondence or anything else they want read.

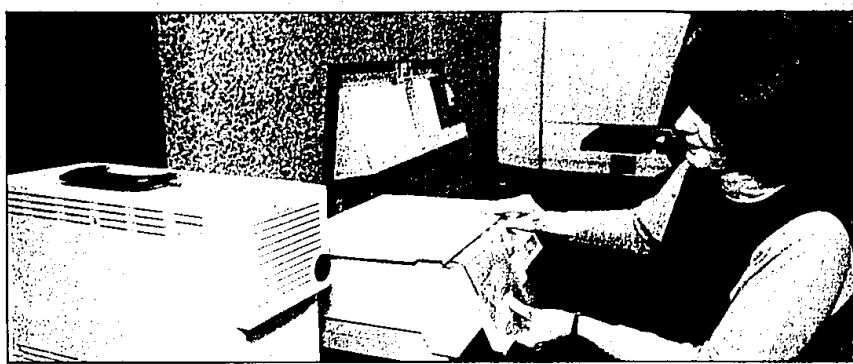
"Someone who reads braille, for example. They don't have any independence to read something like their mail, documents or personal or professional materials," Papai said.

Instead of providing a visual output, the Kurzweil digitizes sounds into its computer memory. And it also adds intonation, so it's not monotone," she added.

The machine has two major components. The electronics unit houses the circuitry and software needed for converting scanned text into spoken words.

The second component is the scanner, which is an optical device that takes a picture of the page you want to read. The picture is converted into electronic data and is further processed and converted into speech.

VISUALLY IMPAIRED users will listen to a tape about how to operate



SHARON LAMIEUX/staff photographer

Tina Theeke, manager of the Farmington Hills branch of the Farmington Community Library, demonstrates the new Kurzweil Reading Machine for visually impaired patrons. The

machine allows people with visual impairments to have any materials they wish read to them by a choice of synthesized voices.

the machine, including choosing a voice in which they want their materials read. Headphones also will be bought to provide the user some privacy, Papai said.

"This is information accessibility on the spot. That's why we're in business," Papai added.

Yes, the Kurzweil can be considered expensive. "But someone can come in here, examine it, and test it in terms of their lifestyle."

The machine also dovetails into the new Americans with Disabilities Act, which expects all people who are handicapped to have equal opportunities, Papai said.

The Kurzweil also is beneficial for people who are physically handicapped as well as those with reading disabilities, Papai said.

The machine also complements the Oakland County Library for the Blind and Handicapped whose services are offered at the Farmington

Community Library.

also can be provided for businesses who hire people with handicaps.

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