

Agency celebrates 'learning through listening'

BY GARY WIKELMAN
STAFF WRITER

Richard Bernstein wouldn't be who he is today without Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic.

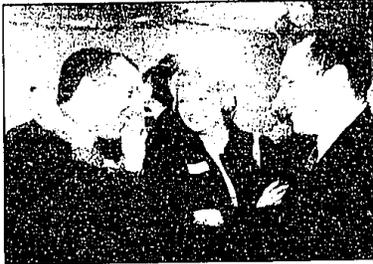
The Farmington Hills attorney and newly elected member of the Wayne State University Board of Governors has hurdled the obstacles blindness challenged him with and excelled in life. His success springs in no small part from the service RFB&D has provided him with nearly his entire life.

"Every single book I've ever read comes from here," he said. "This was my lifeline."

Bernstein, 29, can barely contain his enthusiasm when he talks about RFB&D, which has its Michigan studio in Troy. The Birmingham resident said he owes his education to the nonprofit agency, where volunteers work almost invisibly recording textbooks and other reading material requested.

It's painstaking work, but volunteer readers and monitors are committed to the effort, which fills a need that no other organization or government agency currently provides.

On Monday, RFB&D marked the beginning of Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic Week (April 28-May 3) with a gathering that thanked agency volunteers and let celebrity readers see firsthand how printed words are



Attorney Richard Bernstein (left) talks with state Sen. Gilda Jacobs and Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano Monday at Troy-based Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic.



Farmington Hills attorney Richard Bernstein, blind since birth, says Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic enabled him to gain an education. "This was my lifeline," he said Monday as the Troy agency paused to honor its volunteers.

PHOTOS BY JOHN STORVING (STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

repackaged on cassettes and compact discs for loan to users.

"We have to say 'thank you' to the volunteers," Bernstein said. "Thank you for all the hard work you do."

At RFB&D's Troy studio — an unassuming building set back from Rochester Road near the Sylvan Glen golf course — volunteers produced 5,960 hours of taped text last year.

The agency has 165 volunteers who work in teams to deliver free texts for more than 7,000 Michigan members, kindergarten through graduate school.

Readers record their text in a soundproof booth while directors operate recording

equipment, proofread and check for correct pronunciation.

Bernstein saluted RFB&D volunteers and applauded their commitment to "faceless" people they'll likely never see or hear from. He said volunteers allow people like himself "the opportunity to experience the world" and open educational doors that otherwise would remain locked.

"You will allow disabled people to overcome their obstacles," he said.

NEW ERA

Troy is home to one of 31 RFB&D studios nationwide. The organization was founded

in 1948 as Recording for the Blind in order to help blinded World War II veterans obtain educations under the G.I. Bill.

In 1995, the agency changed its name to Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic to more closely reflect the diverse population it serves. Today, more than 75 percent of audio text-book users have a learning dis-

ability.

Although its primary mission — learning through listening — hasn't changed,

RFB&D is evolving. Troy's studio is in the midst of upgrading its technology from analog booths to new digital recording stations. Going digital will improve accessibility and sound quality for users and

allow textbooks to be placed on one compact disc instead of multiple cassette tapes.

The agency has already converted four of its booths to digital, but has five more stations to go. At a cost of \$15,000 each, the transition is no easy task.

"This unit has entered an interesting period in its history," said Richard Ktoma, incoming chairman of RFB&D's board of directors.

Even as the agency aims at upgrading its technology, it is rebounding from a major cut in funding from its primary benefactor, The United Way.

Ktoma said the financial situation not so long ago was so dire the agency faced going under.

However, RFB&D is now taking matters into its own hands and has embarked on a series of fund-raisers that will make the agency more financially independent.

"It's kind of a big corner we're turning," Ktoma said. "We decided to take the ball and run with it. That's the exciting part."

In addition to this week's annual Record-A-Thon, where volunteers collect pledges for recording hundreds of hours of text, RFB&D is holding a Bowl-A-Thon May 16 at Troy Lanes and a golf outing July 21 at Edgewood Country Club in Commerce Township.

Ktoma is optimistic about the agency's future and enthusiastic about the service it provides. "This work needs to be done," he said.

Ktoma, an accountant, got involved with RFB&D a couple of years ago. A Troy resident, he had passed the agency's Rochester Road building frequently and always wondered what it was. He dropped in one day to see what it was all about and is now among its biggest boosters.

"I'm just happy to be here at all," he said. "It's just a neat unit. I'm glad to be associated with a unit that's on its way up."

Ktoma said RFB&D is a great organization to volunteer with and can accommodate people's various schedules and specialties.

The agency can always use more monitors and readers and help with administrative duties. Training is provided.

Beyond attracting more volunteers, RFB&D wants to spread the word about its work and reach out to those who could benefit from recorded texts.

"We want to raise awareness of our services," said Carla Reeb, the agency's executive director. "A lot of people who need services don't even know about us."

Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic is holding an open house 2-4 p.m.

Saturday, May 3. The public is invited to come and tour the agency's Troy facility. RFB&D is located at 5600 Rochester Road, south of Square Lake Road.

For more information about RFB&D or its upcoming fund-raisers, call (248) 879-0101.

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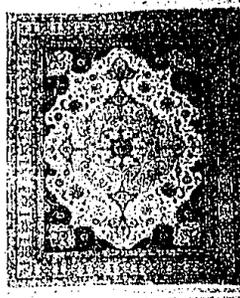
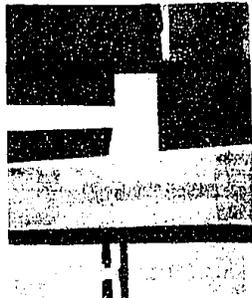
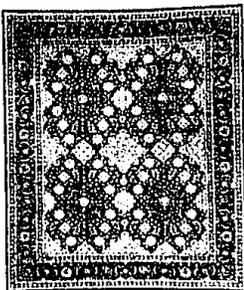
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