



Rebecca Fox takes advantage of an RFB&D audio recording.

PHOTO BY JASON A. ZWIKER

# Hearing Is Believing

*For students with serious vision problems,  
an audio-textbook program can accelerate learning.*

By Linda H. Lamb

Like all the other students in her Johns Island classroom last year, Rebecca Fox met the characters in *Tom Sawyer*: quirky Huck Finn, scary Injun Joe, cute Becky Thatcher and mischievous Tom himself. For Rebecca, these characters could not be found between the covers of a book. She's dyslexic. When she tries to read, the words and letters take on

a three-dimensional quality, seeming to float up and off the page.

But by using special equipment through a program originally designed to serve the blind, Rebecca can slip on headphones to hear all her reading assignments and textbooks. What a relief for her—and for her mom, Helena Fox-Fraser of Charleston, who along with Rebecca's grandmother used to read all of her textbooks to her.

The program is Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (RFB&D). Headquartered in New Jersey, it recently added a South Carolina staff.

“We love it,” said Fox-Fraser, whose dyslexic son also uses the program. To help her children and others like them, she donated a RFB&D membership to their school, Charleston Collegiate.

“It’s like reading the book,” Fox-Fraser explained. “They’re able to join in the classroom discussions and understand what everybody else is talking about. I really think they’ll use this all the way through college.”

Helping people pursue their educational goals always has been the mission of Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic. Anne T. Macdonald, a member of the New York Public Library Women’s Auxiliary, started the program in 1948 to serve veterans blinded by injuries during World War II. Eager to use the new GI Bill of Rights and get a college education, they were unfamiliar with Braille and in desperate need of recorded textbooks.

The auxiliary created a program initially called Recording for the Blind. Readers were enlisted, recording equipment acquired and recorded textbooks manufactured (on vinyl phonograph disks). Now, the program has 29 recording studios producing textbook CDs that serve almost 141,660 people. Interestingly, 70 percent of current RFB&D users have visual learning disabilities such as dyslexia, rather than blindness or low vision.

“We would never abandon the blind community,” said Libby Anne Inabinet, director of the program in South Carolina. Her business cards contain information not only in print but in the distinctive raised-dots pattern of Braille.

However, she said, it’s also important to provide specialized help for the increasing number of students being diagnosed with visual learning disabilities. As a teacher for 19 years, Inabinet worked closely with such students. “I really thought I could be a voice for these kids,” said Inabinet, a mother of two whose family lives in Columbia. “This is a program that works.”

# Turning on the Lights



Stupid. Slow. Those are the names Christine Lowry’s classmates called her in elementary school. Diagnosed with a reading disability in first grade, she was placed in Mildly Mentally Retarded (MMR) classes for most of the day. “It is amazing how cruel kids can be to each other and how teachers can expect so little,” she says. “I was frustrated because I wanted to read specific books which the class was reading but . . . even when my parents asked the school if they could read the books to me, the school refused to allow me to read above my reading level.”

Christine wasn’t stupid or slow. She was an intelligent child trapped within the maddening confines of dyslexia and yearning to get out. When she was first

learning to read, she didn’t see spaces between the words—just a long list of letters. Today, when she looks at a page of text, the words run off to the left side of the page and disappear. She sees a bull’s-eye in the center of the page; the letters inside a word switch and slide down into the space between the lines. Words that disappear off the side of the page do not come back until she looks away from the text for a few minutes.

By the time she was in sixth grade, despite various reading tutors and reading programs, she read at only a second-grade level. Her parents pitched in to read her work to her at night, and insisted she complete projects her regular classes were tackling. They would spearhead home discussions about history, math, literature and science. Yet, despite her parents’ reassurances, by the time Christine graduated from sixth grade, she was convinced she was indeed stupid.

In an effort to turn things around, Christine’s parents home-schooled her in seventh grade. “This was the greatest time of my life for schooling,” she says. “I had a math tutor who used visual aids to help me understand math concepts. . . . Then I had a life-altering experience.”

There are many types of dyslexia, Inabinet explained. It isn't merely a matter of encountering the word "door" and seeing it as "rood." Letters may stand out in blurry or swirling patterns. The middle letters of a word might jump out while letters at each end seem to fade away. Blocks of text may appear to have vertical or wavy margins snaking through them. For those of us who see and read normally, the diverse frustrations are hard to imagine.

Fox-Fraser said that since both she and her late husband had coped with dyslexia, she was intent on helping their children: Rebecca, 13, now in eighth grade, and Robert, 11, now in sixth grade. They discovered Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic three years ago. Fox-Fraser said it has enabled the children to be mainstreamed in a regular private school.

Charleston Collegiate has a learning center to assist about 35 of its 280 students who have learning disabilities. About eight use the RFB&D equipment, said Colleen Tully, who directs the center. "It lets them get information at the same rate as their

peers. It's very laborious for these kids to try to phonetically break down the words. By the time they do, their comprehension is gone."

Students follow along in the books as they listen to the recordings. That process can help them develop ways to cope with their visual problems and eventually read more easily on their own, Inabinet said.

Technologically, the recorded books have come a long way from those vinyl disks, which contained only 12 minutes of material on each side. Not only can one of the new CDs hold an entire textbook; the playback machines let listeners place "bookmarks" and zero in on a particular chapter heading, page or paragraph.

In this era when parents might have to get one of their children to explain Photoshop to them, the young students take to the technology easily, Tully pointed out. "All kids love computers and other technical things they can get their hands on. They almost look at it like a privilege."

*By Marie Hodge*

## RFB&D Turns a Reading-Disabled Child's Life Around

That experience came in the form of a seminar Christine and her mother attended at the Washington, DC, office of Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic. A graduating high school student talked about RFB&D and how it was getting him through school (and would enable him to attend college). Christine felt empowered. She joined RFB&D and began ordering books.

Her first CD was about the racehorse Man o' War—fittingly, since she loved horses and had ridden since she was seven. Because she was a newbie, it took her "forever" to read it. She kept losing her place as she followed along, and her mother patiently helped her find it again. Soon, she had trained ears and eyes to work together and was able to get through books more quickly.

Her priority was to order tapes for every single book she had been denied the privilege of reading in elementary school. "I was hooked on reading," she says. "I started at one end of the shelf and worked my way to the other."

When she returned to public school in eighth grade, it was on her own terms, with an arsenal of textbooks on CD. The CDs allowed her to keep up with the class. By the end of ninth grade, she was a straight-A student. "RFB&D opened my eyes to all the possibilities in this world. It allowed me to see what I could accomplish and to appreciate that I was smart."

In high school, she became president of the robotics team, cocaptain of a NASA rocketry team and the proud owner of an Advanced Placement (AP) diploma with honors (after taking five AP classes). She took up the violin, using RFB&D books to track the notes and become an accomplished musician.

Christine is from Reston, Virginia. Last spring she addressed a fundraising luncheon for the South Carolina chapter of RFB&D and brought the entire room to its feet with her story. She is now a sophomore at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, studying mechanical engineering. Without RFB&D, she told the teary crowd, she wouldn't be where she is today and would have many fewer options for her future. "RFB&D has given me the ability to compete with my peers," she says—an ability most of us take for granted.

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*Marie Hodge, formerly of Columbia, is a writer and editor in Roanoke, Virginia.*

The program also helps students stay motivated, said Traci Young Cooper, a former South Carolina Teacher of the Year. Now working in the Richland District 1 office, Cooper formerly taught special-needs students at Alcorn Middle School in Columbia. The school used a donated RFB&D membership to provide CD versions of books on students' recommended reading lists.

"These were books meant to be enjoyed," Cooper said, and the program helped children do that. "The ability to pace themselves is a plus. It gives them a strong sense of independence."

Worldwide, RFB&D distributed more than a quarter-million titles last year. There's a constant need for new titles—considering that students and schools request everything from elementary school storybooks to law school textbooks. For students doing research papers, academic reference materials are available to borrow from a reference library at the organization's Princeton, New Jersey, headquarters.

Inabinet noted that 125 schools and other organizations in South Carolina have RFB&D institutional memberships. Fees vary according to how many books they may receive. Almost 1,800 students are being served through individual or institutional memberships, which cost \$35 a year plus registration fees and purchase of playback equipment. Charitable donations may allow the program to help people with some of the costs. Carolyn Donges, an outreach director, helps students and teachers use the materials and technology to get the most out of the program.

Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic also serves vision-impaired South Carolinians—a population estimated at 14-15,000 and expected to increase as an older population strives to stay active despite ailments related to aging.

Inabinet is working with other organizations and government agencies that need customized CDs to serve people coping with blindness or low vision. For example, the South Carolina Lions Club has arranged to have its monthly newsletter recorded in an audio format for members who have impaired vision—a service that costs the group about \$100 a month. Recipients can listen on a regular CD player.

For blind students, the recorded texts of RFB&D provide a helpful option to Braille books that often



*Prof. Valerie MacPhail works with Converse student Sarah Massengale.*

are thick, bulky and heavy. Those whose vision is impaired later in life may find it easier to use recorded books than to master the skills involved in reading Braille. Those trained in Braille may find that some textbooks are easier to find in the audio format, or are easier to use.

Sarah Massengale, 18, an aspiring coloratura soprano, has been blind from birth. She used mostly Braille textbooks while in public schools in Barnwell. But she preferred recorded textbooks when she encountered the extensive course load during her junior and senior years at the Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities in Greenville.

"In one case, when I was taking a very involved music course, I couldn't find the music history textbook [in Braille] anywhere,"

said Massengale, who hopes to become an opera singer. "RFB&D was able to get a slightly earlier version of it for me."

When she sings, she feels that people can forget she is blind. "And if I ever get rich, my dream is to own an opera company that employs only people with disabilities," she said.

Like the cane she uses to get around campus, her RFB&D texts and playback machine will help her work toward her goals. ❖

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Individual memberships in the Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic program are \$35 per year, plus an initial registration fee of \$65 and purchase of a playback device. A member may check out 35 books a year.

There are three levels of institutional memberships, with fees ranging from \$350 to \$950 per year. Institutional members have access to 25-100 books per year.

To volunteer for the organization or attend an informational meeting called a "Learning Through Listening Hour," contact Libby Anne Inabinet at (803) 463-1400 or [lainabinet@rfbdrucv.org](mailto:lainabinet@rfbdrucv.org). Inabinet can tell you about RFB&D's Adopt-a-Text program. For a \$1,000 tax-deductible donation, you can make a recorded textbook available through the organization's library. If you wish, donations may be made in honor of a business or person whose name will be announced on the recording.

For information online, visit [www.rfbd.org](http://www.rfbd.org).