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NORTH-CENTRAL CONNECTICUT'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Connecticut's talking newsstand for the blind celebrates 30 years

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For the Journal Inquirer

Published: Tuesday, June 1, 2010 11:33 AM EDT

WINDSOR — On a recent Wednesday morning from a sound booth inside the freshly opened new broadcast studio, a CRIS radio volunteer read obituaries for thousands of people across the state with disabilities preventing them from reading the newspaper.

It's a popular service provided by the Connecticut Radio Information System, a nonprofit organization that bills itself as Connecticut's "talking newsstand for the blind and print handicapped."

The organization had a ribbon cutting ceremony May 17 for its new broadcast center on Windsor Avenue. The ceremony was attended by Gov. Jodi Rell, who was once a volunteer reader for CRIS.

Rosie Morliene has been tuning in to CRIS since it first went on air in 1979. She now serves as a volunteer Tuesday evenings.

Legally blind since the age of 19, Morliene operates the control board in the studio. The instruments have Braille labels enabling her to control the sound as other volunteers read in the sound booth.

She said she enjoys giving back to an organization that has done so much for people with impaired vision.

With only six paid employees, CRIS is primarily a volunteer operation. Its staff of almost 400 people read a variety of publications from national news sources to local newspapers such as the Journal Inquirer.

Programming also includes magazines, books, and health-related programs tailored to its audience like Focal Point, which discusses issues significant to people with disabilities.

The service, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary, provides clients with a basic amenity most people take for granted: the ability to stay informed of the community around them.

"It really opens a door for our listeners," Executive Director Dianne Weaver Dunne said of CRIS broadcasting, which helps prevent listeners from becoming isolated due to their disabilities.

Thomas Grossi, president of the CRIS Board of Directors, has been legally blind since birth and recalled a time when his inability to read the newspaper landed him in an uncomfortable situation.

Unable to read the obituaries, he asked an old friend how his wife was doing, unaware she had died a few weeks earlier.

His dilemma illustrates the disadvantage faced by people whose news is limited to what they hear on television and traditional radio stations.

CRIS volunteers read entire newspapers and listeners get information from business news to what's on sale at the local supermarket. They even describe the pictures featured in the

paper.

While Grossi, a Red Sox fan, can listen to the game on the radio, he relies on CRIS readers to get the in-depth analysis provided by newspaper sports writers.

CRIS has come a long way since its first broadcast, a two-hour transmission from the basement of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind in Wethersfield.

About 50 people in the Hartford area heard that broadcast. Today, CRIS is a 24-hour-a-day operation with about 4,000 listeners and satellite studios in Danbury, Trumbull, Norwich, and West Haven.

Though its audience has grown, Dunne said CRIS is constantly looking for ways to reach more eligible listeners.

According to the Department of Labor Speakers Bureau, around 50,000 people, 1.4 percent of the state's population, qualify for access to CRIS, which is provided exclusively to people who cannot read print media.

Though these disabilities are usually sight related, many other conditions can qualify for access including dyslexia, paralysis, stroke, cerebral palsy, Parkinson's disease, and allergies to print ink.

Initially broadcast over radio substations, accessible only by specially tuned radios, CRIS has expanded over the years to incorporate different delivery systems.

Most Connecticut cable providers now offer CRIS on television receivers. There is also a telephone reader program and, more recently, a live Internet stream.

But the service still is looking to evolve with the times and provide more convenient ways to hear its programming.

Dunne said the organization is looking to develop an on-demand system, from which listeners could pick and chose when they want to listen to what programs. She also hopes to feature a CRIS application for users with smart phones.

New programming is also in the works designed to appeal to a broader group of listeners. Dunne said she would like to see segments for children and parents, a program aimed at high school age teens and Spanish-speaking content.

Since the service is free, CRIS relies on funding from the state and from organizations such as the Lions Club. It also organizes fundraising events, like one it is holding on June 27 in conjunction with the New Britain Rock Cats.

Half of the proceeds from the Rock Cats game against the Portland Sea Dogs will go to fund CRIS programming.

People interested in purchasing tickets, or those interested in receiving service or volunteer opportunities can contact CRIS at 860-527-8000.