Bringing Picture Books to Life for Blind Kids: One Color at a Time

How does a picture book about a group of disgruntled crayons lead to hours of engaging fun for blind children and their families?

Through the Great Expectations reading program, National Braille Press brings popular picture books to life using a multi-sensory approach—songs, tactile play, picture descriptions, body movement, engaged listening—all designed to promote active reading experiences for children with visual impairments.

“We started the Great Expectations program because a child’s first literacy experience is a picture book—and blind kids can’t see the pictures,” explains NBP Publisher, Diane Croft. “Traditionally, in our Children’s Braille Book Club, we selected only those books where the pictures weren’t essential, where the storyline carried the plot. Great Expectations takes the opposite approach. Our slogan is: ‘Bringing Picture Books to Life for Blind Kids.’ Our talented and experienced team is making that happen. Even we are surprised how much fun it is!”

The Great Expectations advisory committee, comprised of blind and sighted parents along with teachers of blind kids, chose a particularly challenging book to feature in the program: The Day the Crayons Quit by Drew Daywalt, illustrated by Oliver Jeffers (Penguin). How do you explain colors to blind children? “Colors are a part of our everyday conversation—both literally and symbolically,” says Croft. “We say, ‘I’m feeling blue’ or ‘I’m tickled pink.’ In other words, colors convey emotions that can be talked about in creative ways.”

Diane continued, “In The Day the Crayons Quit, Yellow Crayon argues with Orange Crayon about the true color of the sun—which is both fun and informational. Knowing that the sun is orange at sunset is an important thing for a blind person to know so they too can enjoy a beautiful sunset! Black Crayon wants to be used for more than just outlining, and Blue wants a break from coloring all those bodies of water. Little did the authors know they gave us the perfect vehicle for talking about colors with blind children.

“Color is also one way to identify things. A teacher says, ‘Jamie, which coat is yours?’ ‘The green one,’ says Jamie. This can easily be taught, and should be. A video on the Great Expectations website showcases a blind mother making a ‘colorful’ fruit salad with her young son, who is sighted. In the process, they talk about colors: ‘Let’s cut up the yellow banana and add it to the salad. What colors are in the salad now?’ Why is that important? Because blind kids grow up to become blind parents,” Diane added.

To further enhance the experience, NBP has included numerous activities promoting aspects of the story through songs, jokes, body movement and group activities. In the Hand Jive Categories game, children sit in a circle clapping hands and snapping fingers while calling out categories of objects, like green foods or brown animals, in sync with the rhythm.

“More than anything else we want the program to be fun as well as educational,” says Croft. “So, for example, every book has a JOKES page. And they are really really terrible jokes, which is precisely why kids like them. My favorite bad joke? ‘Why did the tomato turn red? Because it saw the salad dressing.’”

To learn more about Great Expectations books and activities go to www.greatexpectations.pub.
The Space Telescope Science Institute and software company SAS recently developed a groundbreaking multi-touch ebook called *Reach for the Stars: Touch, Look, Listen and Learn* that teaches students about astronomy using an interactive format featuring interviews with top NASA scientists and visuals captured by the Hubble space telescope. Beyond interactivity, the textbook’s focus was also on accessibility. The ebook is compatible with refreshable braille displays, features voiceover, audio-embossing, and sonification. However, the authors, Ada Lopez, Elena Sabbi and Ed Summers, looked to NBP to bring the images to life for the visually impaired. NBP created 12 tactile overlays for the ebook. Using suction cups, the tactiles lay on top of the corresponding image on the iPad so students can feel Tarantula Nebula and select the Hodge 301 or tap x-ray or gamma on the electromagnetic spectrum to learn more just like their sighted peers. *Reach for the Stars* is available for free on iTunes and the tactiles can be purchased through our bookstore.

At the age of 28, sales professional, Tara Gearhart, joined the Braille for Life Alliance. “I included NBP in my will as I believe it is important for myself, and future generations to lead by example and have things that they strongly believe and support in a lifelong manner. I am not blind, but braille is important to me; literacy for all is important!” Four years later, Tara, her husband Joe, and their little girl, Mable are among our biggest supporters. Tara serves on our Board of Trustees; helps on our silent and live auction committees and with Joe has run in the Blindfold Challenge raising thousands of dollars for NBP. At our Annual Meeting, Tara will become our new Development Committee Chair. “If I inspire someone to consider donating so others can experience reading and independence, than I am happy.”
Because Braille Matters Luncheons are Back!

After the success experienced in 2014, NBP will resume its series of luncheons across the country. The first luncheon was held in April at Bryn Mawr College, outside Philadelphia. Halle Watkin, a junior at the college along with her friend and freshman, Lizzy Muhammad “were fantastic hosts” said Joe Quintanilla, VP of Development and Major Gifts. “It was great to see the first blind student at Bryn Mawr, Suzanne Erb, class of ’78 meet Lizzy, who like Suzanne, loves braille and finds it essential in her ability to compete in the class room” says Quintanilla.

NBP will be in New York City on July 16th, La Jolla on September 18th, and Austin in early October.

“We hope to get to 14 cities this fiscal year. The opportunity for us to update our braille readers on our publications, UEB, technology initiatives, and get their feedback first hand is very important. The welcoming response we got last year was energizing and those who volunteered to host us have been amazing!” he adds. If anyone is interested in hosting a Because Braille Matters Luncheon in any of the following cities: St. Louis, Baltimore, Houston, Miami, Cincinnati, or Columbus, please contact Joe Quintanilla at 617-425-2415.

2014 Touch of Genius Awards

On April 2nd, National Braille Press held its Touch of Genius Prize for Innovation Award Ceremony at the Microsoft NER&D Center in Cambridge, MA. The Prize is awarded to professional, educational, or gaming software and apps that promote tactile and braille learning as well as braille or tactile-related hardware. This year the top prize was awarded to TechBridge World’s Braille Writing Tutor and honorable mention was awarded to Rahul Kumar Namdev’s Intuitive STEM Accessibility System. The Braille Writing Tutor is an automated braille writing tutor which addresses challenges associated with learning to use a slate and stylus. And the Intuitive STEM Accessibility System is an interactive platform to make complex STEM material accessible using a hyperbraille device. NBP was honored to recognize the outstanding work of TechBridge World and Namdev. If you are interested in submitting an innovation for the 2015 prize, please contact Ximena Ojopi at xojoji@nbp.org. The Touch of Genius Prize is made possible by The Gibney Family Foundation.

National Braille Press continues to lead the way in providing affordable braille materials, changing the lives of those who are blind or visually impaired.

This would not be possible if were not for our generous donors. From The Day The Crayons Quit, to Reaching for the Stars, NBP empowers children and adults by providing them the tools for reading and lifelong learning. As our new fiscal year begins, please consider becoming a Literacy Champion. A commitment of $10 or more per month will go a long way in our ability to guarantee every blind person has access to braille and reading! Donations of any amount can put a book in the hands of blind children and adults. There are those who wonder if braille is necessary. We ask, will people ever need to stop reading? The answer is no, braille is the only way a blind person can read. Thank you for making this happen.
On the third Monday of April, April 20, 2015, at 11:15 a.m., Team NBP, Rich Gilreath, Barbara O’Connor and Patrick Mullins left the gates in Hopkinton, to pursue their 26.2 mile trek that is the Legendary Boston Marathon. Enduring 20-25 mile hour head winds and rain, Rich, Barbara and Patrick all had fantastic races: Rich ran 4:01:27, Patrick ran 4:30:31, and Barbara ran 4:51:33. As a partner in the 2015 John Hancock Marathon Non-Profit Program, NBP’s participation in the Boston Marathon raised $23,000 for braille literacy! Thank you to our runners and John Hancock for putting books in the hands of blind children and adults!