

Talking Book Voices Podcast
Season 3, Episode 1
People of TBP: Braille Assistant Inez
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Podcast Transcript
Alicia and Inez

Summary: In this special episode celebrating Braille Literacy Month, meet Inez, the Braille Office Assistant at TBP. In this episode, Inez will share her journey as a lifelong braille reader and how her passion for accessible reading shapes the work she does each day. From transcribing and proofreading Braille materials to preparing books and digital cartridges for readers across Texas, Inez helps make braille more available to everyone who needs it.

NARRATOR INTRO: Welcome to Talking Book Voices, the podcast. Get ready to embark on an adventure with us as we dive into and celebrate the magic of the Texas Talking Book Program. Let's raise our voices together and make the world of literature accessible for all. The Texas Talking Book Program is a division of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission and serves as a regional library for the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, a division of the Library of Congress. The Talking Book Program provides specialized library services to individuals who have a qualifying visual, physical, or reading disability, such as dyslexia.

In each episode of Talking Book Voices, we will delve into the heart of the program, uncovering its history, sharing inspiring stories, and

exploring the vast collection of materials it has to offer. We will bring you the latest updates, interviews with program experts and patrons, and useful tips to make the most of this invaluable program for Texans and beyond.

So, whether you're an avid reader, someone with a print disability seeking accessible materials, or just curious to learn more about this great program, this podcast is made for you! Don't forget to visit us at www.texastalkingbooks.org for more information. So, let's begin Texas Talking Book Voices, a podcast by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

ALICIA: Hello podcast listeners. Thank you so much for joining us again today. My name is Alicia, and I am an engagement specialist with the Talking Book Program. And today I am very excited to sit down with Inez, our braille office assistant at the Talking Book Program. Hi Inez. How are you doing today?

INEZ: Hi, Alicia. I'm doing fine!

ALICIA: Good! Well, I know that you have a personal background as a braille reader, and your job has everything to do with braille and assisting all of our patrons at TBP to access braille materials. But I'd like to start with that personal background. So, can you tell us a little about your personal story and when you first learned to read braille?

INEZ: Yes, thank you. I was born and raised in El Paso, and I was born a rubella syndrome baby, which meant that I had congenital cataracts and a hearing impairment. I first learned braille when I was

in first grade. I was taught braille from first to third grade, and I also learned to read print at the same time.

ALICIA: Wow. And may I ask, was that at a public school in Texas?

INEZ: Yes, it was.

ALICIA: That's amazing that you had access to learning braille at such a young age. What was your experience with braille in your early school years and your early life? What role did braille play for you?

INEZ: Well, looking back, I ended up learning to read in two mediums, both braille and print, and braille was an assistance to learning to read as I was growing up, you know in those first three years in elementary school.

ALICIA: Mmm. So is there one medium that you prefer when you're reading? Do you prefer braille or reading standard print?

INEZ: I prefer reading print, but I use braille as a secondary.

ALICIA: Hmmm, that makes sense. Were there any teachers, tools, or moments that made braille really click for you when you were learning it?

INEZ: The one big thing was that I picked up reading really fast. By the time I was in third grade, I was reading above grade level.

ALICIA: Wow, that's pretty impressive. So you had that innate ability to read at a higher level, and that really helped you when you were learning how to read both standard print and braille. Is that correct?

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: Aha. Okay. So I'm also curious, how has Braille shaped your independence or the way that you access information today?

INEZ: Well, it has shaped me in a way that I am able to provide those who need braille as a tool to read, write, learn, and you know, basically use it as a tool to be able to get, uh, to navigate around their environment and their world.

ALICIA: Right. So the biggest way that it's influenced you is perhaps the career path that you chose, which is to help other people access braille materials.

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: Okay. Well I'd love to learn more about that career path because you have a professional role at TBP, and I'm wondering what does a braille office assistant at TBP do in a typical week?

INEZ: In a typical week, I am transcribing materials from print into braille. I'm also creating labels for our cartridges for Texas magazines. I'm also, um, if a patron needs information from, say, from our Disability Information Center in braille, I will go ahead and provide that information that's been given to me and braille it for them.

ALICIA: Wow. And when you say you "braille it for them," what does that mean exactly?

INEZ: I will take a document such as a Word document that's been typed up. I will import it into a braille transcription program, edit it and format it and transcribe it into braille. And on the screen, on a computer screen it will... you will see the braille dots. And once I'm

gone through, looked through it, make sure it looks good, I will emboss it on one of our embossers.

ALICIA: Ah, and for people who've never heard about this process before, embossing is a word that refers to actually making the bumps or the dots stand up in a raised way on a piece of paper. Is that right?

INEZ: Yes, it is.

ALICIA: Okay. That's really incredible. I'm also curious, what part of your job do you enjoy the most and why?

INEZ: I think the best part of my job is interacting with coworkers and finding out what I can do to assist them in helping our patrons.

ALICIA: Yeah, so it's all about the team that makes the dream work.

INEZ: Yes!

ALICIA: Aha. Well, what are some more behind the scenes steps that go into getting braille materials into readers' hands? You had mentioned the embossing process and editing and formatting. Are there any other behind the scenes things that you do?

INEZ: Yes, especially when I'm doing larger documents like books, there's a lot of proofreading involved. Before I emboss, say, a book, it will go through several rounds of proofreading to be sure that the errors have been corrected and cleaned up; make sure that everything is where it's supposed to be and it looks good that the braille reader will be able to settle down and comfortably read a book. And then once it's embossed, I will bind it and turn it over to

our collections office area, and they will prepare it to send it out to, to be circulated.

ALICIA: That's so interesting. So you're actually binding books?

INEZ: Yeah.

ALICIA: Here at the TSLAC office?

INEZ: Yes. We're putting some books together. You know, it's not like full blown binding. We use the combs.

ALICIA: Combs. What do you mean by combs?

INEZ: The braille paper we use for our books have holes that we can feed combs through them.

ALICIA: Ah, kind of like the spiral bound notebooks, but instead of metal spirals, it's plastic spirals.

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: Ah, I see. Well, so it sounds like you assist with quality checks a lot as part of your job.

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: You also assist with labeling and coordination for braille circulation?

INEZ: Yeah.

ALICIA: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit more about that circulation piece, like how you work with the circulation team?

INEZ: Well, the circulation team, once the book has been handed over to be prepared to circulate, uh, our collections librarians will

add the information to our circulation listing of books, and then they will send it out to circulation to be, uh, available for patrons to check out.

ALICIA: Okay, so that physical book that you embossed, you put those raised braille dots on and you put the binding on so that it is a physical book that can be flipped with turning pages... That must be a really cool feeling knowing that your work is going directly into the hands of patrons.

INEZ: It is a good feeling.

ALICIA: Ugh. Amazing. Well, I'm curious, um, and the listeners might be curious as well about what types of braille materials are available to them through TBP?

INEZ: Well, as of right now, we do have books available for circulation from very young readers to adults in various genres. A lot of our books come from NLS, and of course, now that we're doing some of our own like Texas based books by Texas authors or about Texas, we're now making those available to our patrons.

ALICIA: Wow. And do you also offer any magazines in braille?

INEZ: Not at this time. The only thing I do for magazines is create the labels for our audio magazines that we circulate because they go out in cartridge and I create the labels to affix to the cartridge with the magazine title in the issue.

ALICIA: Oh wow. So you're not only creating books all the time in braille, but you're also embossing labels for various items.

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: Okay. And what other types of items require labels besides the magazine cartridges?

INEZ: It just depends if somebody needs a card or... Recently I did some business cards for some of our staff who need them to hand out. And I did those in braille.

ALICIA: Oh, wow. Okay. And we also have physical games in our collection. Um, do you ever create labels or instruction packets for those?

INEZ: Yes. A lot of the games come with labels already provided. I just affix the labels to the game pieces that are missing them.

ALICIA: Ah, okay. And are you doing any quality check to make sure that the braille is accurate for those games?

INEZ: Yes. I double check to be sure that the proper pieces are in the right places. And once in a while I will do, if we need to, any rules for the games. If the rules are not available in braille, I will braille the rules for the games.

ALICIA: That must be kind of fun to be able to see all of the games that we have in our collection.

INEZ: It is. I mean, over the years there have been games that have already been made accessible in braille, but now that we're adding to that games that we've never had brailled before.

ALICIA: Right, right. So the collection is growing all the time.

INEZ: Yes, it is.

ALICIA: Do readers have options for both hardcopy braille and digital braille formats?

INEZ: Yes, they do. It depends on the patron's preference, if they prefer hard copy books, and if we have them in our circulation area, we will send those out to them. And now thanks to BARD, if they have an e-reader, they can download braille books through BARD to read on their e-readers.

ALICIA: Wow. Can you tell me a little bit more about those e-readers? How does that work exactly?

INEZ: The e-readers are like a mini, uh, what you might call, uh, you know, it's a braille version of, you know, say, an e-tablet. But instead of having a flat screen, you'll have braille keys and a line of say, 20 cells across that use raised pins to bring up the various letters and numbers or you know, in case of contracted braille, the various characters: they are raised.

ALICIA: Oh yeah, I think I've seen one of those. Um, Zoomax and Humanware are two examples of e-reader machines and the, like you said, the pins on the surface of the machine rise and fall to create different characters so that somebody can read the raised pins with their hand.

INEZ: Yes

ALICIA: That is such a cool piece of technology. And TBP has lots of digital Braille books and some digital Braille magazines as well?

INEZ: Most of them right now are available through BARD. We do provide our newsletters, our quarterly newsletters, we do provide them in a BRF format that patrons can download and read on their e-readers.

ALICIA: Amazing. Well, can you describe a little bit more about how BARD works for someone who prefers to download their braille titles?

INEZ: BARD stands for Braille and Audio Reading Download. Which means that if you are a TBP Patron, you can sign up for BARD and on BARD you can scroll through lists of books either in audio or braille and in, in this case we're talking about braille. If they want books in braille, they can set their settings to say, okay, I'm looking for books in braille. And they can do a search based on maybe recently added books or a specific genre, author, or title.

And if they find any books that they like or they want to read, they can add the book to their wishlist. Then using their e-reader, or they can download it onto their computers and transfer it to an e-reader, a braille e-reader, they can download those books onto the device, and then from there they can read the books.

ALICIA: Wow. So that way they have a portable library with them all the time.

INEZ: Yes!

ALICIA: I love that. And for patrons who are exclusively braille readers and are curious about our catalog, not only do they have the opportunity to log in and scroll through the catalog using a screen reader software, but they also have the opportunity to call our reader services consultants who can talk to them on the phone and talk to them about their favorite authors, their favorite genres, titles that might be similar to other ones they've read... You know, just have a chat about all of their preferences and, and that way those can be put into their account for them.

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: I love that. Well, are there services or tools at TBP that support people who are learning braille for the very first time.

INEZ: Yes, there are sources for those who have lost their eyesight or who need to learn to read braille. In Texas they can receive services through the Texas Workforce Commission Blind Services or for those like family members who are curious, who want to learn braille, there's also, uh, Hadley. Which is another resource for those who are learning not only to read braille, but also other skills that they would need, uh, in order to live a normal life.

ALICIA: Wow. And I also know that within TBP we have the Disability Information and Referral Center, the DIRC, and anyone in Texas, regardless of if they're a patron of TBP already or not, can call our call center, ask for the DIRC and get referred to lots of resources about learning braille, including Hadley. But also we have a bibliography or a book list of easy beginner braille books that are in TBP's collection.

INEZ: Yes, we have a lot of books for those that are learning braille, especially when they start out with just, they can start out with just learning the alphabet and basic punctuation, and those would be considered uncontracted braille. But as they continue learning braille, they will learn, begin to learn contracted braille, which is shortcuts for certain groupings of letters, words, and other characters.

ALICIA: Hmmmm. And because the collection of braille books includes books for all reading levels and all ages, someone who is an adult who is learning braille for the first time could check out a

braille children's book, for example. And that would be a good, easy way to start because it has simple words.

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: And we also have braille flashcards and braille Legos that help people to practice, uh, the shapes of the different characters.

INEZ: Yes. That is a really good source. Anything with... that involves learning braille is a helpful resource, like the braille Legos is a good example because they have individual pieces that are just letters or numbers when they can just group 'em into words.

ALICIA: Hmm. You know, I'm wondering, does somebody have to be blind in order to read braille or to learn it?

INEZ: No. Anyone can learn it. If you know somebody who is a braille reader or has a family member who's got low vision or is learning braille, they can learn it themselves in order to help them or just to learn it for just the fun of it.

ALICIA: Yeah! Braille actually is really fun. When I first started my job as an engagement specialist here, I completed a braille activity book, um, which are available also here at our office, so if anyone's interested in a braille activity book for sighted people, go ahead and give us a call and we can mail one to you. But yeah, I completed one of those and it taught me some of the basics of braille, and I realized it's kind of like a secret code.

INEZ: It is. It's almost like learning a new language or a new code.

ALICIA: Right, which is really, really fun to do. You, you feel really satisfied when you kind of understand some of the basics and you can write messages to your friends.

INEZ: Yes. When I was learning braille as a child, I'd learned it by looking for the patterns in each cell, because each cell had a group of dots, you know, depending on what letter or symbol you were looking at. And, uh, each of them had a pattern. And so I would look for those patterns.

ALICIA: Hmm. And with enough practice, you became fluent, would you say, uh, fluency in braille?

INEZ: Yes. When I first started reading braille, we were reading the old English Braille format, but back in 2016, we switched to the Unified English Braille. And when we switched to that new version of braille, because changes were made, you know, some contractions and, uh, were eliminated in the simplified punctuations and, uh, font indicators and things like that, and it did not take me long to transition from the old code to the new code.

ALICIA: Oh wow. And maybe that's because you are such a naturally talented reader.

INEZ: Mm-hmm.

ALICIA: As we know from when you were a kid!

INEZ: Yes.

ALICIA: Well, what would you say to someone who is thinking about trying to learn braille but feels nervous or unsure?

INEZ: Just take your time and practice.

ALICIA: And now is a particularly good time to start learning braille. Can you tell us why, Inez?

INEZ: Yes. In January we celebrate Louis Braille's birth, his birthday.

ALICIA: Who is Louis Braille?

INEZ: Louis Braille is from France. He was the one who developed the braille code using dots.

ALICIA: Oh, so he is one of the main reasons why we have braille today.

INEZ: Yes, it is. He lost his sight as a child. And in school, he, when they were trying to teach him to read raised letters, he realized there had to be a better way to learn to read.

ALICIA: And now we get to celebrate his birthday and honor his legacy by learning braille and spreading the word that braille is really cool.

INEZ: It is, and you can find it everywhere now. Just look around. You're in an elevator or you're approaching an entrance to a building or on a door sign, you will see braille next to the print.

ALICIA: Wow. It's kind of like the secret code that's all around us. Helping to make the world more accessible for everyone.

INEZ: Mm-hmm.

ALICIA: Well, those were all the questions I had for you, Inez, and thank you so, so much for joining me today. And to all of our listeners, thank you for being here and learning with us. We look forward to seeing you on the next episode.