

Library for handicapped

IT HAS BEEN announced that the Braille and Talking Book Library will be 'established as a free public library authority for the purpose of providing library services for all print handicapped persons in Victoria'.

The Library, situated at South Yarra, Vic, has received a grant of \$50,000 from the current State Municipal Library Subsidy – the first funding of this type in Australia for a library for the print handicapped.

Jan Smark, Chief Librarian at the Braille and Talking Book Library, is the author of the following article:



IMAGINE a free library service with no printed books and say, five visiting borrowers per day.

Imagine a library whose formats cost about seven times that of an ordinary public library, existing on a financial base only 20 percent of which is government funded.

Imagine a service where staff perform the 'browsing' process using a profile individually tailored to each borrower's tastes and specific title requirements.

Then add to your imagination 10 huge sacks of mail delivered every morning (105,000 items every year) and turned around the same day to be posted throughout Australia.

And you have the Braille and Talking Book Library, an independent charity-based library which has served the print-handicapped with a free library service since 1894.

But there the fairy tale ends. Like any other business, rising staff and material costs

recently began to outstrip the endowments and legacies left to the library.

When I was appointed Chief Librarian in October, 1979, I realised that before I could come to grips with the tasks involved in a library service producing and distributing braille and audio books, the funding base had to be changed – and radically.

There were enough funds, if no more borrowers were enrolled or not another book produced or purchased, for the library to exist for two years. By then the Braille and Talking Book Library would have ceased to exist because all its assets would have been sold.

The Victorian Minister for the Arts, Norman Lacy, was invited to the library to see at first hand the extent of the services provided. The largest collection of braille books in Australasia, mostly produced by the library itself, is an impressive sight. Talking books, books and magazines on cassette, services providing ephemeral material like metric conversion tables, train, tram and bus routes, football and cricket fixtures, restaurant menus and birthday cards, were shown to the Minister.

Funding similar to public libraries was sought as a right. A publicity campaign was evolved to help combat foreseen difficulties with Treasury.

With no funds at all, the campaign, in the space of four weeks, generated 12 newspaper articles, one ABC TV news interview, six ABC radio news items, several commercial news features and three radio interviews.

Help and support was sought, for the first time, from the general public.

On 5 May 1980, Mr Lacy announced that the Braille and Talking Book Library should be established as a free public library authority for the purpose of providing library services for all print handicapped persons in

Victoria'.

On the basis that at least three percent of the population are print handicapped readers, he allocated three cents in every \$1 from the Municipal Libraries vote for the provision of these services. This funding was to begin as soon as an increase was announced in the current allowance (now at \$2 to \$1).

Mr Lacy also announced an immediate grant of \$50,000 from the current State Municipal Library Subsidy.

This announcement heralded the first funding of this type in Australia for a library for the print handicapped.

Two expansionary factors are built in. One is the population growth factor, the other the long-awaited increase in State Library funding. Since both these factors are based on percentages, the Braille and Talking Book Library can expect to receive funding growth.



Given this type of funding base the Braille and Talking Book Library feel confident of its ability to provide a leadership role for public libraries in their provision of services to print handicapped readers.

The Braille and Talking Book Library will offer support, advice and expertise to libraries setting up their own collections.

What did we learn in this successful exercise? Politicians are not as insensitive to the underprivileged as we sometimes imagine (or fear) and that a good public relations program can work wonders.

Further, we may sometimes underestimate the sympathy of the media to an important story told in a direct and specific way. □



Jan Smark in the cassette department of the Braille and Talking Book Library. Photo: courtesy The Melbourne Age.