

Seeing Clear Now





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One
hundred
and
fifty-seven
thousand.

That's an important number to a group of men at the Delaware Correctional Center. It's not the number of hours they've been incarcerated, collectively, or even the amount of money it takes to keep them all at the prison for a year. One hundred and fifty-seven thousand is the number of pages of text and graphics that the men have transcribed into Braille over the past 13 years in the "Men With a Message" program.

The inmates don't learn how to make Braille materials to acquire a job skill for when they're released; the market is too small to allow them to support themselves transcribing. But the men do gain many skills they can transfer to other jobs once they leave prison—for example, working with a group, following through on projects, asking for help when it's needed, giving help when it's requested, and turning in assignments on time.

Inmates at the Delaware Correctional Center train in Braille to help kids with visual impairments learn, and to gain work skills for the outside. By Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

Certified as Brailleists by the Library of Congress, the inmates have transcribed employee handbooks, novels, textbooks, worksheets, and more for Delawarians of all ages with visual impairments. Perhaps the most grateful recipients are the schoolchildren. In part because of the availability of Braille materials made by the inmates, children in Delaware with visual impairments have been mainstreamed into regular classes, where they take part with their own versions of the same materials in the same activities as sighted children.

The selection process to join this elite group is rigorous, and the training for certification is described by inmates as “hard, demanding, and taxing.” But the men speak of their work with excitement and pride. Attrition is mainly from prisoner release; it’s rare that an inmate has asked or been asked to leave the program. And although the training doesn’t take place in a traditional classroom or even at a computer screen in a corporate office, if you look closely, you’ll see many success factors you may recognize. The men don’t throw around such terms as *coaching*, *performance improvement*, and *leadership*, but those elements certainly exist in the Men With a Message program. See if you can spot them.

In the beginning

In 1989, an itinerant teacher who was employed by Delaware’s Department of Health and Social Services Division for the Visually Impaired (DVI) needed school materials brailled quickly. The state was legally required to provide textbooks and worksheets to students with visual impairments, but the only options were to purchase Braille versions at high cost or find volunteers to Braille them. The volunteer pool was shrinking, and teachers often ended up having to transcribe the materials themselves. Nancy Frankl, who has been teaching students with visual impairments for 22 years, re-

calls how she spent many summers Brailleing textbooks and worksheets, using the typewriter-like Braillewriters “until my arms started to hurt.”

Although the nature of itinerant teacher Craig Trefney’s connection to the prison has been lost, we do know that he turned to the Delaware Correctional Center for help—thus launching the Brailleing program later dubbed by the inmates Men With a Message. According to DCC Braille instructor Sam Miller, three inmates started transcribing in an old visiting room that was “closet-sized.” The men used computers donated to DVI, Apple Is and IIs that, Miller says, constantly broke.

In the years since, the program has expanded to 13 men (12 Brailleists and one man who transcribes large print), who use newer PCs and work in a spacious room in the prison’s education building. Although Trefney has long since moved on, his legacy remains: a unique program run through a partnership between the Department of Corrections and the state’s Division for the Visually Impaired.

It’s a team rather than an individual that ensures the program’s success. Just one full-time employee of the prison is assigned to work with the men. Miller, a former correctional officer and now certified Brailleist, takes charge of the inmates as they work 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. in the program. Ann Hitchcock, volunteer services administrator at DVI and Miller’s supervisor, spends one day a week at the prison bringing assignments in and out, answering questions, researching and interviewing candidates, and conducting the evaluations that take place one, three, five, eight, and 10 years after an inmate is certified. Hitchcock also works closely with DCC’s deputy warden and business manager to resolve any problems that arise. It’s that open communication, Hitchcock says, that makes the program work.

Among the inmates, the Brailleing job is a prestigious one. Prison work is limited, and a job that doesn’t involve manual labor is especially prized. But the program restricts the number of men involved. When a slot opens up, there’s an extensive application process. To select a new Brailleist, Hitchcock and Miller research each candidate’s educational background and prison activities, confirming them with the DCC staff. They also conduct an initial interview that explains the stringent job requirements and expectations, make cuts, and then often conduct a second interview with members of the prison’s executive board made up of the warden, deputy warden, and others. They may also request a writing sample.

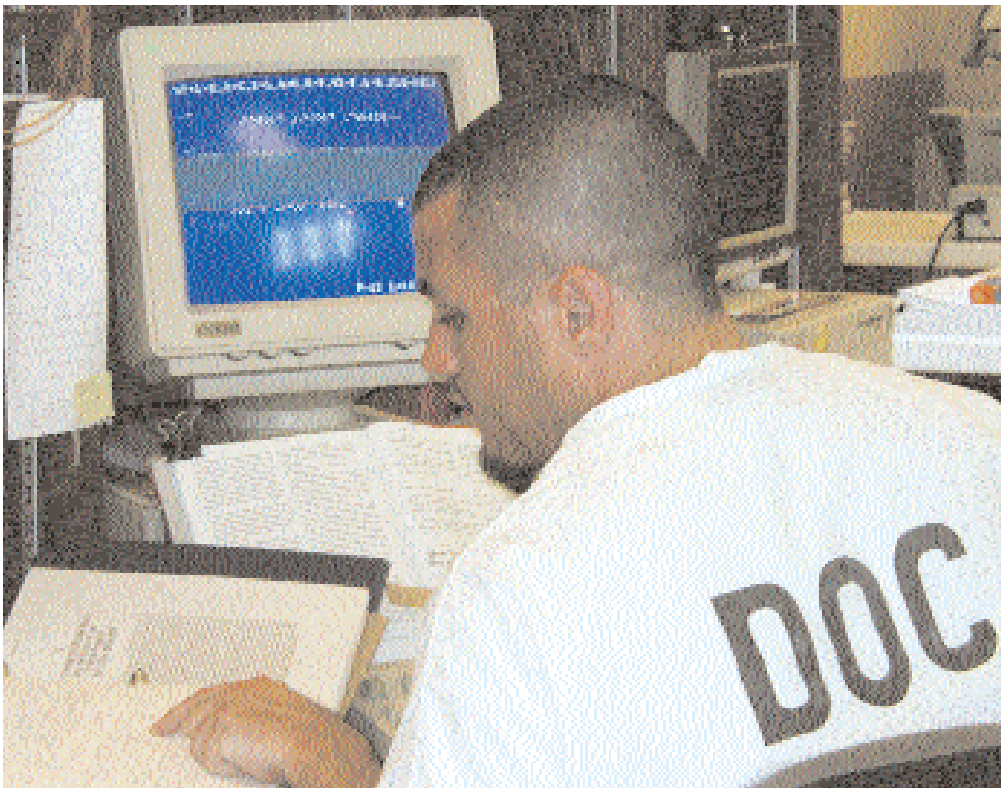
Because the application process and the training are time-intensive, Miller and Hitchcock look primarily for inmates who will be incarcerated for “a lengthy period of time,” Hitchcock says. She determines what that means on a case-by-case basis, but because it takes an inmate nine months to a year to learn Braille and become certified and another year to become proficient, “not having the turnover makes the program run smoother.”

What’s involved

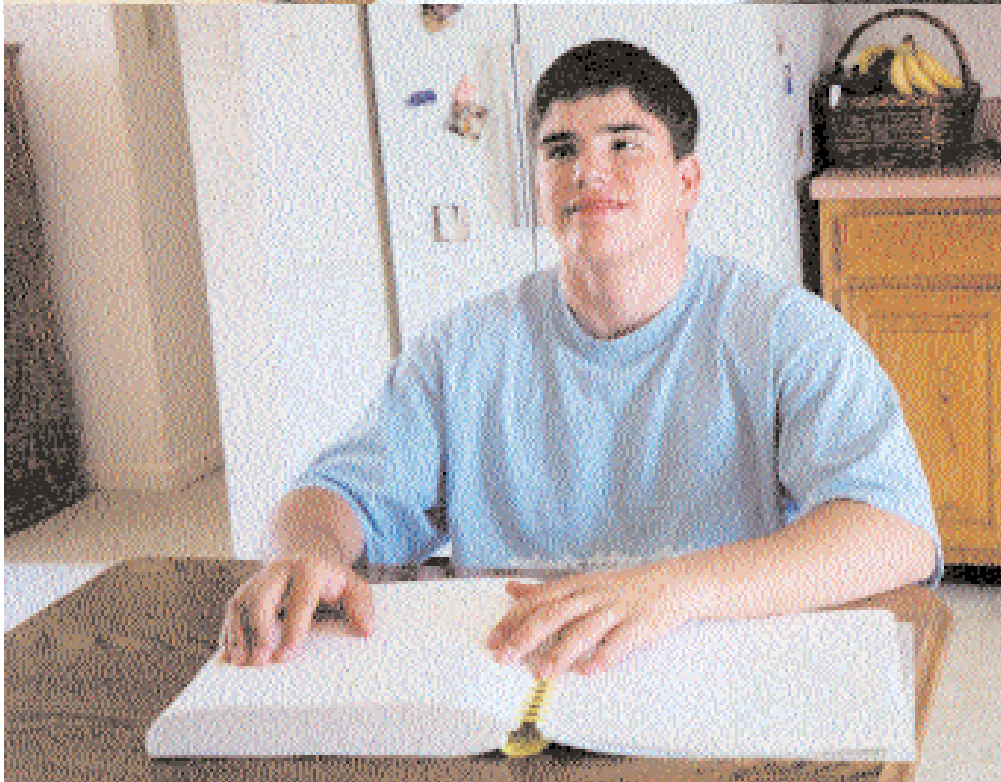
In addition to letters and punctuation marks, there are 189 contractions in standard Braille. It takes most children with visual impairments about five years to learn the complete system, says Frankl, but some students aren’t able to learn it. “It really helps to be bright,” she says.

The Braille training program that the inmates of Delaware Correctional Center follow was developed in part by the Library of Congress and in part by the Men With a Message coordinators. The LOC provided the self-study curriculum and manuals, but the coordinators added many instructional and collaborative elements (more on those later).

The men finish the training in about a year, but real mastery comes slowly, a little



The men don't throw around such terms as coaching, performance improvement, and leadership, but those elements certainly exist in the program.



at a time. One reason is because the rules for writing Braille aren't always straightforward. Contractions are used to reduce the space taken up by the bulky Braille characters—letter combinations such as *er*, *ar*, and *tion* can be represented by just one or two symbols—but Braille manuals can differ on contraction rules. In addition, decisions must be made about how to format each page so the information is conveyed clearly. How, for instance, do you Braille a play, or a poem with unusual spacing?

Learning how to space Braille characters and format pages can make one's head swim. Explains Glenn MacDonald, the newest DCC Brailier who started in February 2002, "If you were just Brailleing the letters, it would be 100 percent easier." Howard Parker,

Top: An inmate Brailles a book using the Pokadot software.

Left: Kagan Nuss reads the finished product.

Braille: A Brief History

When Louis Braille was four, he pierced his eye with an awl belonging to his father, a shoemaker. An infection in that eye spread, causing him to lose vision in both eyes. As a young man, about 1820, he modified a “nightwriting” code used by a soldier he met. The code was rejected by the army because its 12-dot system was too complex. So Braille made the written language of six raised dots that people with visual impairments use today. The system has spread around the world and been adapted to almost every language. In his home country of France, Louis Braille was reburied in 1952 in the Pantheon, which houses national heroes.

Sources/National Federation of the Blind, www.nfb.org; Royal National Institute of the Blind, www.rnib.org.uk



who’s waiting on his certification from the Library of Congress, agrees. “The different contractions, the rules as to when to use a contraction, the rules about how to put together certain words” are what’s hard, he says. He adds that sighted brailists need to “unlearn a lot of things to think like an individual who’s visually impaired.”

In addition, Braille is a living language and there’s always something new to learn. For instance, new symbols come out regularly—like one for the Euro—and new subsets of the language are developed as well. Computer Braille is perhaps the newest addition, with eight dots per cell.

To complicate matters further, inmates must transcribe not only the text of books and materials, but also the graphics. In the past, volunteers or teachers who did the transcription wouldn’t always include the graphics. The Men With a Message coordinators, though, believe strongly that people with visual impairments should have the same advantages as sighted peers.

Creating graphics that can be viewed by touch is an involved process. According to Donald Simmons, 10-year member of the program, two different methods are used. For simple graphics, the back of the paper is punched to form raised dots in the desired shape on the front—the trick is to remember that everything will be reversed when you flip the paper over. For more complex graphics, the picture is enlarged on a copy machine, then each component is traced onto paper and cut out. The pieces of paper are then layered so each section can be felt separately. Next they’re made in thermoform, a type of thin plastic. Simmons used this second method to make amazingly detailed graphics of the male and female reproductive systems for a biology textbook. He says he enjoys the challenge of this intricate work. “Some guys hate graphics. To me, it’s like putting a puzzle together.”

The inmates’ hard work isn’t wasted on the students. Kagan Nuss, an 11th-grader at Caesar Rodney High School who has been using inmate-made Braille materials his whole school career, marvels over graphics on worksheets about the industrial revolution. One shows a weaving machine. The inmate glued down rope to enable the students to feel the

strands going into the machine, and he crisscrossed the rope further up to show the woven strands. As Nuss’s hand plays over the picture, you can hear the excitement in his voice. “This is really excellent. They put a lot into this one,” he says. Nuss estimates that it took two days to make that one graphic.

There’s no right or wrong way to make a graphic. There’s only one criterion: Will the student understand the information presented? The men brainstorm. Sylvester Shockley, in the Braille program for four years, says, “If I get stuck, I go to someone and ask for help. I get ideas of how to do something to help the student understand.”

For all those reasons—the complex rules, the formatting challenges, the changes to the language, and the intricate graphics—Braille transcribing can’t be automated. Frankl says many teachers don’t understand what transcribing involves when they hand over a worksheet or book to be Brailled. “It’s so easy for them; they can just put it through the copy machine and make 100 pages [for sighted students].” A math or science textbook can take one to two years to Braille and—even with contractions—multiply three to four times (1000 pages to 4000 pages, for example).

The train gang

It’s impossible to discuss the Men With a Message Braille training program without highlighting another key figure: DVI volunteer Ada Stokes. A former teacher at the Maryland School for the Blind who has only 10 percent vision in one eye (and none in the other), she has been an invaluable resource to the program. Over 10 years of working with the inmates, she has developed supplementary training materials and methods that take the Library of Congress curriculum to a new level.

The first thing Stokes did when she joined the program was to “undo some

stuff,” she says. Trefney’s goal was to get materials Brailled quickly; Stokes introduced the notion that “Braille done in a hurry has to be done as accurately as Braille done patiently and slowly.” If just one tiny dot is wrong in a six-celled Braille character, Stokes says, the word changes and the student may not learn.

To standardize the training, Stokes suggested that the prison adopt the Library of Congress curriculum. The self-study program consists of 19 lessons, each accompanied with drills and an ending exercise. The lessons start with the alphabet and continue to punctuation, contractions, and formatting (including book parts and types). Each lesson builds on the ones before it. An inmate must use the Braillewriter to complete his drills and exercises, which forces him to redo the page each time he makes a mistake. Once he’s certified, Hitchcock and Miller allow the inmate

to graduate to the PC and a software program called Pokadot.

Though much of the initial training is self-study, the men aren’t left to founder on their own. Each new inmate in the program is assigned an experienced mentor who helps the new Brailist understand what he’s studying and ensures that he completes each drill and exercise. The mentor is also there, says Stokes, to say, “Hey guy, you’re doing a good job.” Although Hitchcock assigns one mentor to each new Brailist, other inmates often pitch in. Says four-year veteran Ben Sudler, “People can come to any of us for knowledge.”

Experienced Braillists serve in a second capacity on three-member support teams that correct each uncertified Brailist’s exercises. This three-check system ensures, says Simmons, that “no one man can say that you

failed or passed.” After the support team reviews each exercise, it goes to Miller and then Hitchcock to review. Hitchcock makes the final decision about whether the inmate is ready to move on to the next lesson.

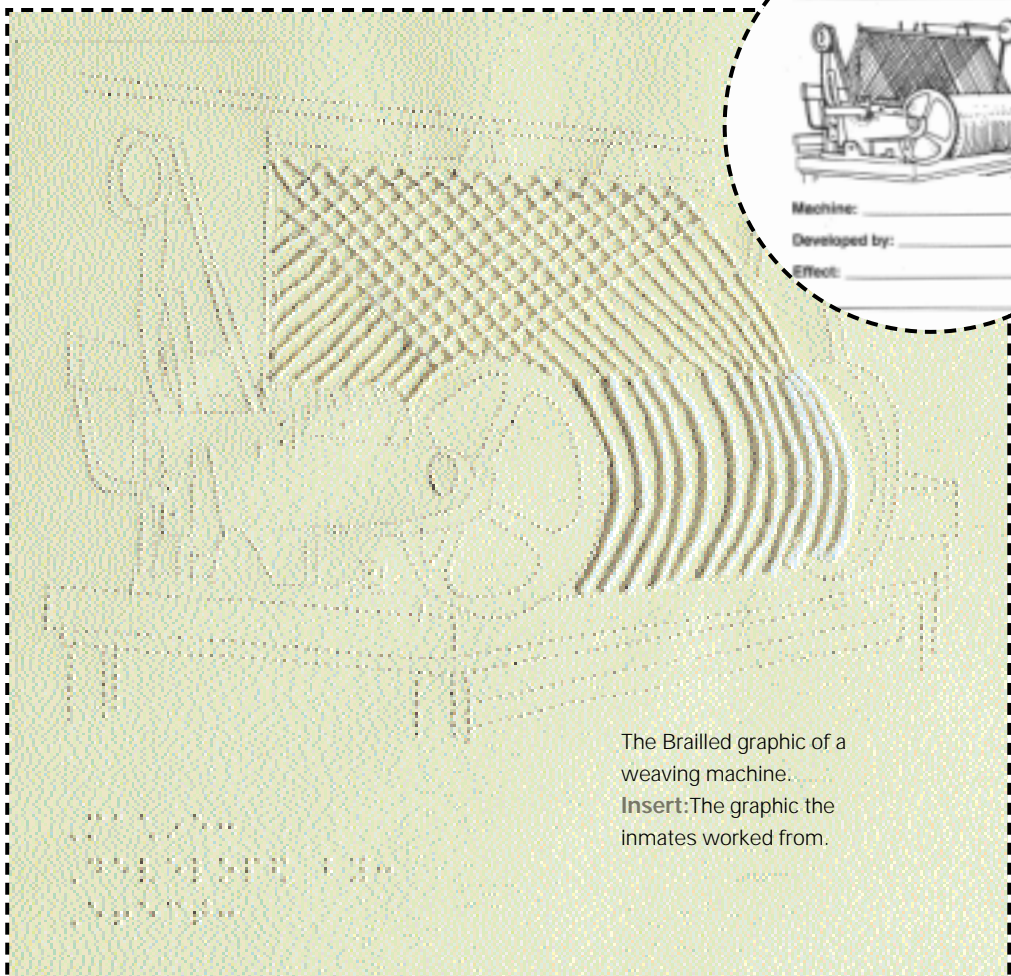
At lesson 10, the mid-way point, Stokes added several checkpoints to the curriculum. Comprehensive reading and writing exercises test an inmate’s grasp of the material up to that point, and a graphics workshop teaches the men how to do the intricate and labor-intensive work after they’ve completed lesson 10.

To train the men to make graphics, a skill that’s not covered in the Library of Congress curriculum, Stokes did some background reading but mostly drew on her experience as a teacher of students with visual impairments and as a person with a visual impairment. A kit she ordered from the LOC included tools

to make dots of different sizes and lines of different thickness. Stokes taught the men how and when to use those tools, prodding them to think about what it’s like to be blind and how information should be conveyed that will be seen with fingers. “Nobody can train these guys about that,” Stokes says. “It’s something they must learn over time.”

The graphics training and supplementary exercises give the program coordinators additional ways to assess an inmate’s capability and progress at the halfway point. If a man’s performance on those checkpoints is unsatisfactory, he may be removed from the program. Stokes can remember only three times that happened in her 10 years with Men With a Message. She says it’s a testament to the selection process developed by Hitchcock, Miller, and the prison staff.

After an inmate has successfully



The Brailled graphic of a weaving machine.

Insert: The graphic the inmates worked from.

passed the halfway mark, he's given simple assignments to Braille, short text-only books. He works on those part-time and completes the lessons part-time. He also gets paid for the first time, at the standard prison wage of US\$0.48 per hour. That increases to \$0.56 an hour after he's certified.

Lesson 19 requires that inmates select a book of their choosing to Braille and that they submit a 35-page manuscript to the Library of Congress for grading and possible certification. Applicants start with a score of 100 and lose points for each mistake; the passing score is 80. Manuscripts are submitted by inmates with full disclosure. Hitchcock says that the Library of Congress knows where the materials come from and is "very supportive" of the program. Because there are few volunteer Braillists now, the LOC "realizes that this is a way of solving the problem of getting materials transcribed into Braille by qualified people."

Once an inmate's manuscript receives a score of 80 or above, he's certified in literary Braille, but his training doesn't stop there. To help the men format and Braille the textbooks that make up the bulk of their work, Stokes created textbook training that's given to inmates after they're certified. To develop the training, Stokes identified with Hitchcock and Miller the specific challenges inmates faced when Brailleing textbooks, then pulled out material from a formatting manual to discuss with the men and create exercises from. Once an inmate has completed the workshop, he receives a copy of the manual to refer back to.

Both the textbook and the graphics workshops are now given by veteran Braillist Simmons, who took over Stokes's trainer role after health problems forced her to reduce her time at the prison. Stokes hopes to return to the program soon, but in the meantime is confident in Simmons's abilities, describing him as charismatic, bright, and a natural leader.

Stokes worked closely with Simmons to help him hone his training techniques and put him through a mock session with the three program coordinators, in which he received constructive criticism. Simmons uses a seminar format for his classes: The men discuss the material, and Simmons diagrams it on the chalkboard. He also gives workshops as needed on various topics the inmates are "muttering in their beards about" (having trouble with).

After a certified inmate Brailles for a year, Hitchcock and Miller allow him to work towards additional LOC Braille certifications: literary proofreading, Nemeth (the math and science code), Nemeth proofreading, music, or foreign languages. With each additional certification, the inmate gets a slight raise.

Because Braille is a language that grows and changes, DVI makes sure that the men are kept up-to-date with developments on the outside. Although the inmates can't go to conferences, when volunteer Braillists with DVI go, they bring materials home to share with the men. "Thank God for Xerox," Stokes says. Or if the "Braillists on the outside," as Stokes calls them, don't get to workshops, Hitchcock orders the materials. Simmons gives a class about every six months to update all of the men on changes to the language or new Brailleing methods.

Putting it all together

Here's how, from start to finish, a Braille textbook gets into print in Delaware. When a child with visual impairments is assigned to a mainstream classroom, the teacher will notify DVI's itinerant teacher what materials the class will be using that year. The information is passed to Hitchcock, who researches whether the material has already been Brailled by the inmates or another program. If it hasn't, she'll assign the book to one of the Men With a Message and he "gets busy," she says.

After the inmate finishes the Brailleing

and graphics, one of his colleagues will proofread the material. Once corrections are made, Hitchcock takes the manuscript to DVI's materials center for production, embossing, collation, and shipping. The book will then be registered with the American Printing House and appear in its Web-accessible database, from which schools around the United States can request the book.

What would happen if the Men With a Message program ceased to exist? Without it, Frankl estimates that the state of Delaware would have to pay Braillists as much as US\$5 to \$10 a page to transcribe materials. In 1998, the Delaware General Assembly passed a resolution praising the inmates' contribution and acknowledging a \$60,000 cost-savings to the state due to their work. That number has continued to climb in the years since.

But what if paid Braillists weren't available, if the pool of knowledgeable people was just too small to provide Braille materials? If Kagan Nuss didn't have Braille versions of textbooks and worksheets, another student or the teacher would have to read to him, or Nuss and other kids with visual impairments would be grouped together for special help. But Nuss believes that mainstreaming is crucial for his success in a world made up of mostly sighted people. "The more experience you have in the sighted community, the better you're going to be later," he says. He's grateful to the men who make his books, because once kids with visual impairments have the same materials as their classmates, "they can show that there's nothing wrong with them and showcase the talents that they have." Without the materials, he says, "you could be held back or have people thinking that there's something wrong with you."

There's definitely nothing wrong with Nuss. An active teenager, he's on the wrestling team and in all mainstream classes, including some that are college

Cool Resource: HotBraille

Go to hotBraille.com to see your name in Braille, send a Braille letter in any one of 21 languages, learn Braille through fun games, and talk to other people about Braille. All services are free.

prep, such as pre-calculus. And, similar to sighted kids, he tries to pull one over on his teachers now and then. He can't possibly take all of the volumes of his Braille math textbook (several thousand pages) home with him each night, so if he occasionally doesn't feel like doing his homework, he tells his teacher he brought home the wrong volume. "I love turning a disadvantage into an advantage," he says.

Karma connection

There are other prison Braille programs in the United States and Europe, but the one run out of the Delaware Correctional Center is unique for several reasons. In existence for 13 years, it's one of the longest-running programs. It also stands out because it's nonprofit. Because of the partnership between DCC and the Division for the Visually Impaired, there's a direct market for the materials that's not in danger of drying up. All told, about 3000 Delawarions with visual impairments are helped by the Men With a Message program.

Out of about 50 U.S. prison Braille programs, DCC has, Stokes believes, one of the best. Although she hasn't seen the other programs firsthand, she says many of their coordinators have visited DCC and were "flabbergasted by what the guys do." Because the other programs Braille for money, they emphasize quantity rather than quality. The Men With a

Message take great pride in the quality of their work and, according to Hitchcock, they're known for that.

Shockley says it was Stokes's enthusiasm for what Braille could accomplish that inspired him to do his best. Seeing firsthand what a person with a visual impairment has to go through to read appealed to his honor and integrity, he says. "When you see how what you're doing affects another person, you make sure to do it right."

DVI's clients aren't the only people who benefit from the program. What the inmates gain, says Stokes, is "priceless." The men not only gain job skills such as cooperation, discipline, mentoring, and more, but they also engage their mind in constant learning. Howard Parker, who's waiting on certification, says the learning process is his favorite part of the program. "Every day is something new," he says.

Inmate William Douglas, who left the program for a short time when he was transferred to Virginia to ease overcrowding, says he really enjoys reading the material as he Brailles it. "I read some things that I otherwise wouldn't read," he says. Mark Baynard, who was just certified, agrees. "Sometimes the book's so good, I have to go back to read it."

Other benefits to the men are less tangible. Durwin Harmon, one of only four people in the state of Delaware and 200 people in the United States who's certified in Nemeth, says his work in the program has rebuilt his self-confidence. "That's not an easy thing to do, considering where we're at," he says.

For many of the men, the most important benefit of the program is the ability to give back to society. Douglas says the fact that his work is helping someone else is a "huge bonus" for him. "Maybe somewhere down the line..." he muses, trailing off. "Well, I believe in karma." TD

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