

CHAPTER 10

Services to the Blind

LIBRARY: XAVIER SOCIETY FOR THE BLIND

Address: 2 Penn Plaza, No. 1102, New York, NY 10121

URL: <http://www.xaviersocietyfortheblind.org/>

Telephone: (212) 473-7800

E-mail: info@xaviersocietyfortheblind.org

Access: Services by mail and Internet download at no charge to qualified visually impaired citizens

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Xavier-Society-for-the-Blind/45289787681?fref=ts>

It had always been my plan to include a library that provided services for the visually impaired. This is personal for me because I have always been substantially blind in my left eye. If something ever happened to my right eye, I would be facing a very different kind of lifestyle. The best-known service in New York City was Lighthouse International on the Upper East Side. They were hard to reach, but that is not unusual in this project. When I finally did talk to an administrator there, I was told that Lighthouse no longer provided a library for braille and talking books. My estimable colleague at the College of New Rochelle, Sister Martha Counihan, OSU, suggested the Xavier Society. This solved two problems, because I was also looking for a Catholic library (one university in the outer boroughs was known to be relaxed about letting nonstudents into their library for reference, but they did not want to advertise this by being in my book).

I found out that the Xavier Society for the Blind had recently moved from a building in Chelsea to the complex at Penn Station. I liked the location, because I always arrive in the city on the Long Island Railroad, ending at Penn Station. I called the director, Father John Sheehan, SJ, and set up a visit on a Friday in mid-March. Even on the phone, Father John was someone that I was instantly comfortable with, so I knew I was in for a fascinating session.

The Society is on the 11th floor of 2 Penn Plaza, sharing office space with the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB). Father John was waiting by the door when I arrived, in the display area of the Helen Keller Archive, maintained by the AFB. After I put my bags in his office, and coffee was provided, we sat

down and I encouraged him to tell his story. What a story it was. He has had a varied career, working in the South Pacific and Nigeria. His office is lined with wood carvings and stuffed rhinoceros from his 12 years in Africa. He told me that as a young actor (before entering the Jesuits), he once spent a night of postperformance celebration with Richard Burton. After considerable celebrating, Burton began singing a selection of Welsh songs from his childhood.

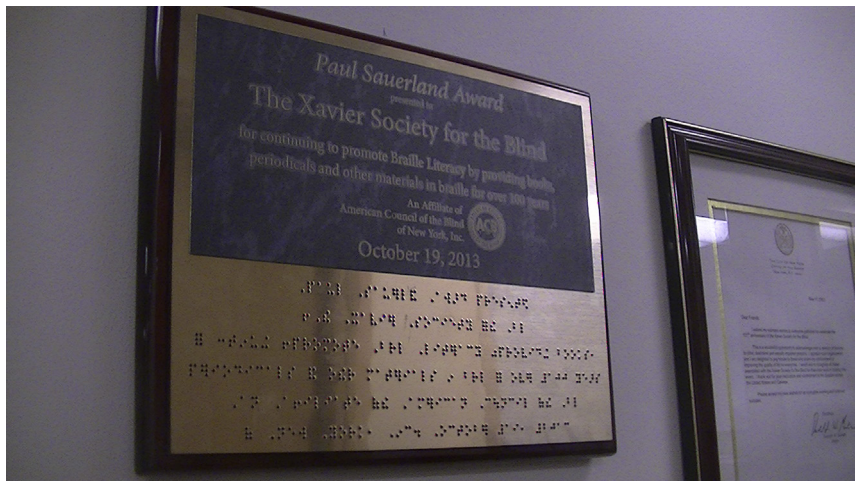


Father John Sheehan.

Father John was appointed CEO and director of the Xavier Society in 2008, when the society operated a standard library to check out braille, large-print, and talking books to certified visually impaired patrons. The organization had been founded in 1900 to provide religious and spiritual materials that other agencies were not providing. Xavier was on solid footing

financially, but then the economy collapsed, and they found themselves in an unsustainable position. To survive at all, Father John had to reconceptualize the operation, sell the building in Chelsea that they owned, and relocate as a slimmed-down provider of data to blind users. This involved layoffs of more than half of the staff. “It was not the best day of my life,” he told me. They were able to soften the blow by providing severance based on the years of service. He was able to cut a deal with the AFB for office space at Penn Plaza. Now the emphasis was on providing braille material to their client base without stipulating that they give it back, providing some audio material for online download, and enlarging the library offerings for audio books.

Father John told me that in the old days, expensive studio equipment was needed to record books and periodicals, but now the technology is good enough that a large web of volunteers can do the recording using their own home computers and send the results in to the organization, from which they are made available through the Society’s Web site for direct download. The process is so efficient that many materials could be available to blind users ahead of the actual publication date. As a registered library in the National Library System (Library of Congress), they can also lend audio books to clients.



One of the Society’s many awards—printed in Braille and visual fonts.

“Braille is still the primary focus.” Father John said that reading works differently on the brain than listening to the same passage in an audio recording, because the recording makes certain choices that cancel the listener’s right to imagine. It is not as destructive to the imagination as a

filmed version of a book, but the same principle is at work here. In the new system, braille readers are encouraged to keep the books and material the Society provides, rather than returning them as they had in the past. To help encourage young blind children, they have been working to expand the selection of books for children of all ages.



High speed Braille machine.

I was told that there are exciting things in technology to serve the needs of blind readers. For instance, there are renewable braille readers—devices that have pins that pop up to create a line of braille text. When you change the line, the pins fall down and then pop up to create the next.

As far as I could tell, Father John's past experiences did not involve services to the blind, so he went on a mission to walk in their shoes and became a passionate advocate for the visually handicapped. "With the right training and equipment, a blind person can do anything that a fully sighted person can—up to and including driving a car," he said. I was told about blind people bowling and playing golf. To help practice what he preaches, he spent several weeks at the Louisiana Center for the Blind, undergoing training, and he still practices his skill by going for walks wearing his sleep shades and his long white cane. One time he

accidentally brushed into someone and the man yelled—“Watch where you’re going. Are you blind?”

After a tour of the Xavier offices I was shown the display room for the Helen Keller Archive. On one side of the room you find Keller’s original writing desk and her chair.



Helen Keller’s desk.

Nearby there is a display case with an Oscar award statuette given for the 1954 documentary *The Unconquered*, produced a decade before *The Miracle Worker*. On a nearby wall, there is a framed picture and note from Mark Twain, who was a huge admirer and supporter of Keller. It is said that when Keller first met Mark Twain she exclaimed “I have touched a king.” As with all archives, this is just the tip of the iceberg.



Helen Keller's Oscar. This was the first actual Oscar I had ever seen.

This has been an example of how a library can morph into something very different while still maintaining its total commitment to serving the information needs of its users. It just takes imagination, a thick skin, and a determined leader to make it happen.

LIBRARY: ANDREW HEISKELL BRAILLE AND TALKING BOOK LIBRARY

Address: 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011

URL: <http://www.nypl.org/locations/heiskell>

Telephone: (212) 206-5400

Access: Open to the public, although special registration required for some services

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/nyplheiskell?ref=br_rs

Transportation: Subway N&R line, 23rd Street

I visited the Heiskell Library briefly after talking with several people who provide services for the visually handicapped. From what I heard, it seemed that the Heiskell is the best bet for someone who needed braille, a talking book, or large type in a traditional library setting. The library is situated in a pleasant Gramercy neighborhood, surrounded by considerable dining choices. I walked in during a very cold wet morning and was very courteously greeted by the security guard at the door. After walking past the circulation desk and the reference complex I could see what was special about this library.

Notably, the shelves were full of large-type books. As a senior citizen, pushing 70, with one eye that is nearly blind, this is the level of service that would affect me currently. After two cataract surgeries I have learned the fine art of taking care of my one good eye. I could see a section of braille books, but I suspect that these were the current ones and many more are likely in storage.

There is a small but well-stocked section with current magazines. I sat down and read restaurant reviews for a time. While there I noticed that there are lots of rooms off to the side for activities like the recording of talking books. This is a library that seems to have found its niche in the neighborhood and in the larger expanse of the city for people with special needs.

FURTHER READING

Fr. John at the Louisiana Center for the Blind: <http://xaviersocietyfortheblind.blogspot.com>.

IPad Braille keyboard: <http://www.wired.com/2015/01/ibrailler-ipad-app/>.

News story about the changing status of the organization: <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1202841.htm>.

Refreshable Braille display: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refreshable_braille_display.

The Unconquered, a documentary about Helen Keller: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048157/?ref_=nm_fimg_slf_2.