

BECKY SKIPPER'S INNOVATIVE WORK EXPERIENCE INVOLVES RESEARCH OF MATH SOFTWARE FOR FELLOW BLIND STUDENTS

January 2007



Becky uses a computer equipped with software that converts text into speech.

USF student Becky Skipper is helping her university to learn more about what is available in the way of high tech teaching aids for her fellow students who are blind or visually impaired. Becky, who has been blind all of her life was assigned a challenging project as part of a special work experience. This project was to seek out any existing adaptive math software that could effectively present equations, statistical formulas, and other more advanced mathematical presentations for students who are totally blind. Until recently, very little was available. Existing speech software is currently unable to read complex formulas accurately unless aided by specialized math software. While many normally sighted students have difficulty with math, those who are blind have the additional challenge of not being able to see complex formulas without the benefit of specialized software that can adequately present math problems in an understandable format. Last summer, a work experience was



Becky and supervisor Paul Stanley take a well-deserved break in the nearby courtyard.

jointly set up by the Division of Blind Services, the Lighthouse's Polk County division, and USF's Lakeland campus to provide Becky with a stipend while conducting her research. Not only was she charged with locating the software, she also had to test and evaluate it. She was assigned to work under the supervision of Paul Stanley, a software developer for the Information Technology Department at USF's Lakeland campus.

To illustrate the dilemma involving oral presentation of complex math problems for people who are totally blind, Paul Stanley orally stated a problem in a manner that it would likely be expressed, and then showed on his display board how it could be written out four different ways, each yielding a completely different answer.

Becky spent about 2 months on this project and successfully identified one software program and 2 – 3 math editors for the blind.

Becky was uniquely qualified for this

task as she has never been able to see and she has always been an excellent student. She graduated 10th in her class from Bartow High School and has maintained a high GPA at USF. She is now a junior, majoring in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences. When asked how she went about locating such specialized software, she said she just got on the phone and called around in addition to conducting her research on-line. With her insatiable curiosity, she thrives on chasing and following leads on all forms of assistive technology. Her primary tools are her laptop computer equipped with speech software and internet access, an electronic Braille writer that stores and plays back Braille documents (with a Braille output tactile display), and a telephone.

Becky began her association with the Lighthouse about 5 years ago when she began taking classes at its Winter Haven facility in daily living skills, orientation and mobility, and computer training. Later, she entered the job placement program which led to the work experience at USF. In her spare time, Becky enjoys reading, socializing, instant messaging, listening to music, and participating in a local support group for persons who are blind or visually impaired.

Becky is looking forward to continuing her work experience next spring when she carries her project a step further to develop a website containing a tutorial for the software she identifies and tests with successful results.

NEW YEAR-ROUND TRANSITION PROGRAM PLANNED FOR EARLY 2007

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Tampa • Winter Haven

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Grocery stores were proven to be excellent sites for work experience where each student could earn a real paycheck.



Classes and group exercises taught the all-important concepts that were reinforced during work experiences and other outings.



Students with partial vision used closed circuit television systems (CCTVs) to complete job applications.

A new program helping blind or visually impaired teens transition into adulthood and the world of work will be available year-round starting in early 2007, thanks to new state funding. Up until now, this transition program was available only during the summer months. The strong success of the summer program over the past 4 years provided impetus for the development of year-round programs for both Tampa and Winter Haven. These programs will serve high school teens and young adults age 14 – 22, providing ongoing training in job-seeking and job-retention skills. In addition, instruction will be provided in daily living skills, orientation and mobility, assistive computer technology, and other skills that support employment. Training activities will be con-



Lessons in grooming included visits to local salons for haircuts and styling that is appropriate for business settings.

ducted at our facilities and during scheduled field trips into the community.

Work experiences will be set up during the summer months and the participants will earn their paychecks which they will learn to manage and budget through their own bank or credit union accounts. All of these activities are designed to help participants get a head start in adulthood by becoming fully independent and self-sufficient.

The participants will be rewarded for their progress and hard work by fun activities that will be scheduled monthly throughout the year. These will include bowling, trips to museums and other educational attractions, theme parks, and other activities.

For more information, call Judy Brannon, Case Manager, at (813) 251-2407.

MACDILL OPERATOR SHERYL LAXSON IS OUR 2006 FRANK A. MACDONALD AWARD WINNER!



Sheryl fields hundreds of calls each day at the busy MacDill AFB switchboard.

Sheryl Laxson has earned this year's Frank A. McDonald Memorial Award because she is an excellent example of an individual who is legally blind and has gone well beyond becoming independent and self-supportive. Sheryl has always been willing to go the extra mile to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Sheryl has been legally blind all of her life, however she had enough useful eyesight to carry out many activities of daily living independently. After graduating from high school, she attended business college and earned a certificate in secretarial services. She worked at various jobs in retail, telemarketing, and cleaning houses. She also ran a home daycare center for friends and family so she could be home when her children were small. She came to the Lighthouse with hopes of improving her family's financial circumstances in 2003 and

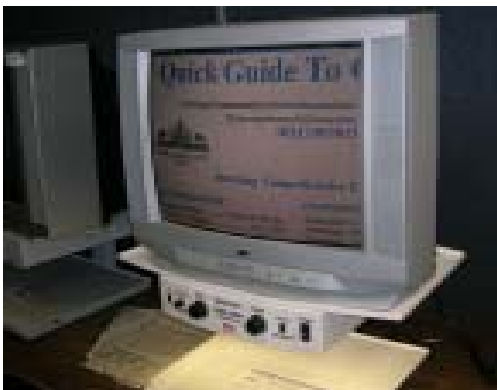
underwent a vocational evaluation, then took typing classes, followed by computer training. She also underwent a low vision examination to see what aids would help improve the use of her remaining vision. In July of that same year, Sheryl was offered a switchboard operator job for the Lighthouse's service contract at MacDill Air Force Base, working only on the weekends, but not for long. She was called often as a substitute whenever one of her coworkers called in sick or needed time off. Sheryl always responded, no matter the day or shift, often on short notice. Even if she had plans, she would rearrange her schedule and come to work. When one of the operators quit unexpectedly, Sheryl was more than willing to pick up two more days. After working for the switchboard for about a year, Sheryl had picked up a 5th day, giving her full time status. Originally her shift started at 7:30 a.m., but she volunteered to come in an hour earlier to help coworkers who needed a later starting time. Even on the day after one of the hurricanes struck the area, she was the first one back to work, restarting all the computers so that as the other operators arrived, they could resume working with no downtime. Nine months after she started working, the Air Force installed a new

computer system that she learned thoroughly enough to troubleshoot problems with little or no help for herself and the other operators as well. She doesn't hesitate to help her coworkers whenever they have problems with their equipment.

Sheryl has been married to her husband Terry Laxson for 19 years. They have three children, ages 20, 16, and 12. She taught Sunday school at Causeway Baptist Church for many years, working with preschoolers and singing in the choir. She performed a valuable service to the community and her coworkers by attending Hartline meetings and voicing her opinion to retain bus service at MacDill on weekends when Hartline was facing having to discontinue weekend service. Fortunately her efforts were successful and MacDill still, to this day, has weekend bus service. In her spare time she enjoys reading with the help of low vision aids, baking and cake decorating.

Sheryl has earned the Frank A. MacDonald Memorial Award as she is a model employee and a model citizen of the community. Her name will be added to the Frank A. MacDonald Memorial Award plaque, which includes the names of all previous award winners.

VISUALLY IMPAIRED VETERANS BENEFIT FROM CCTV'S, MODIFIED COMPUTERS



This is an example of a CCTV that is available to visually impaired veterans.

Thanks to an agreement between the Veterans Administration and the Lighthouse, local veterans now have access to the same assistive technology that has been available to Lighthouse clients for several years. The agreement provides for Lighthouse staff to set-up and install closed circuit TVs (CCTVs) and computers equipped with speech or screen enlargement hardware and/or software at no cost to the veteran. This program has enabled these veterans to be able to

read most kinds of print media, communicate with family members via email, pay bills and conduct banking business online, and independently carry out many activities of daily living. The computer equipment, software, and installation are all paid for by the Veterans Administration. Any veteran who is visually impaired and interested in obtaining a CCTV should contact their nearest Veterans Administration office.

GRADUATIONS WITH HOLIDAY PARTIES RECOGNIZE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF OUR 2006 GRADUATES



Tampa's Class of 2006.



Coleman Middle School's orchestra has provided holiday entertainment to our Tampa graduation and holiday party for 7 years straight.



A full lunch was served following the graduation.



Lunch included sandwiches, potato salad, cole slaw, fruit salad, punch, cake, and more.



Winter Haven's Class of 2006.



Dwayne White on the piano.

It was time once again to focus our attention to our Tampa and Winter Haven graduates who have worked so hard and accomplished so much in a relatively short period of time. Many came to the Lighthouse in a state of despair and left a few weeks later, able to do more for themselves than they ever believed possible. They relived their triumphs in their poignant testimonies and shared with one another and their attending family members following the presentation of diplomas. Family members also shared their testimonials on having witnessed the accomplishments of their loved ones. Our traditional parties followed the graduation ceremonies with lunch, cake for dessert and small bags of candy to take home.

The Coleman Middle School Orchestra – Chamber Ensemble, led by its Director Edward Thanz returned for the 7th straight year to provide wonderful holiday music for our Tampa graduation and holiday party. We thank them once

again for adding so much to this occasion year after year.

At our 13th annual Winter Haven graduation party, the Winter Haven High School Orchestra returned for the 2nd year to provide holiday music for our Winter Haven graduation and party. Dwayne White and Eva Crowder also contributed their musical talents by taking turns on the piano. Once again, the Nora Mayo Hall in the Florida Citrus Building was made available to us by the State of Florida. Santa and Mrs. Claus, played again by Paul and Geneva Albright, returned to entertain, help serve lunch and snacks, and give out bags of candy. Each year near the holidays, Paul and Geneva also give generously of their time to visit local schools as Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus.

For both parties, we also wish to thank our hard-working Lighthouse staff for their efforts in organizing and carry-

ing out these wonderful events. We would also like to thank the staff from the Division of Blind Services for participating in both of our holiday events as they have each year. Finally, we wish to thank the State of Florida for allowing us to use the Nora Mayo Hall again for our Winter Haven party.

TAMPA GRADUATES (in alphabetical order)

Willie Allen, Evelyn Alvarez, Elsa Anturi, Elida Barria, Patty Batts, Alice Bernardo, Bonnie Belles, Bart Butler, Lindsay Campbell, Harold Carlson, Oscar Colon, Mercedes Conde, Molly Corum, Frank Cox, Kenneth Craft, Ben Ebel, Gladys Egusquiza, Anne Etienne, Bonnie Evans, Pilar Ferrier, Jennifer, Fletcher, Jon Follis, Julie Garthaus, Michael Gottus, Andrew Guarrine, Lois Harned, Linda Heinz, Nickie Honadle,

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VISION LOSS HAS NOT SLOWED THIS MAN DOWN!



Omer uses a hand-held electronic reader to read the product labels when arranging products on the shelves.

Omer Gerth had been working for the same sheet metal company for 18 years doing everything from truck driving to ordering materials and repairing equipment when his failing eyesight forced him to retire. He was diagnosed with macular degeneration in 1995, but was able to continue working until he was no longer able to drive. He retired in 2001, but decided to return to work in early 2006. He contacted the Lighthouse last March to help him find a job, specifically requesting employment in a



Special prescription sunglasses enable Omer to gather carts in the parking lot.

grocery store because of his prior positive experience working for a large grocery store chain several years ago in Daytona Beach. Fortunately, his job placement specialist Rich Petras was readily able to find him an opening at a local Publix in Zephyrhills, working 30–32 hours a week carrying out a variety of duties including bagging groceries, bringing in carts, rearranging the shelves, and assisting with closing procedures. Omer still has some useful remaining

vision and was able to benefit from the use of a portable electronic reader with a 6–12X magnification feature, telescopic feature, and illumination provided by Division of Blind Services (DBS). DBS also provided Omer with a pair of prescription sunglasses to reduce the outside glare when he's retrieving grocery carts.

When asked about his future aspirations, Omer, without hesitation, said he was content in his current job and had no interest in working elsewhere. On the job, Omer is comfortable with his surroundings; his friendly disposition enables him to interact well with customers and coworkers alike. His remaining eyesight along with the visual aids enable him to carry out his duties without difficulty.

In his spare time, Omer enjoys home projects (such as painting and installing ceiling fans in his new Zephyrhills home), woodworking (lawn ornaments & furniture), and fishing.

GRADUATIONS WITH HOLIDAY PARTIES - CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4



Winter Haven High School Orchestra returned for a second year.

Gloria Jefferson, Ana Jimenez, Helen Johnson, Rebecca Kearney, Bob Knight, Theresa Kouse, Therese Kramer, Ernest LaPorte, Juanell Linkous, Donald Lintz, Thomas Mantvch, Elena Marcello, Tom McDowell, Joyce Morris, Naomi O'Leary, John Paradiso, George Pasisis,



Santa & Mrs. Claus with young admirer.

Michael Peacock, Marlene Pomery, Madeline Ramos, Joe Rodriguez, Frank Rosen, Wayne Sanders, Constance Sanford, Louise Scoggins, Petra Sotelo, Nilda Sotolongo, Therese Sprinkle, Patricia Stuart, Tamara Villot, Tom Werle, Diane Wetmore, Michael Williams, and Drake Wright.

WINTER HAVEN GRADUATES (in alphabetical order)

Floyd Albritton, Donnie Allen, Melvin Arnold, Murray Balanoff, Lenritha Bell, David Boggess, Bettie Burgess, Doris Campbell, Marilyn Clough, Pat Collins, Bernice Davis, Hugh Davis, Helga Diaz, Marcia Flynn, Pat Fraser, Marjorie Gay, Hany Girgis, Emma Goodson, Shirley Goodwin, Edward Greenwood, James Hall, Vita Hinshaw, Donald Hudson, Teresa Jones, Earl Knighten, Donald Maley, Minnie McCalpin, Judith Moger, Tadeusz Nowak, Wendell Owens, Adam Palmes, David Rogers, Arlene Sharpe, Shirley Smith, James Steele, Dorothy Stevenson, Kenneth Stowell, Jeff Treptow, Evon Thomas, Linda Viramontes Perez, Emma Weekes-Rivera, Roy White, and Eugene Young.

MILTON TURNER, ALWAYS ON THE GO, MAINTAINS AN ACTIVE RETIREMENT



Milton Turner takes visual impairment in stride as he travels about the community.

Milton Turner is 79, legally blind, and is hard to keep up with. He is a frequent rider of Polk County's Citrus Connection bus system, serves as Sunday school superintendent for Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church in Lakeland, participates in many activities at Madella Community Center including painting and bingo, and volunteers for the Lighthouse's Advisory Committee. If

that wasn't enough, he also takes care of his 2 grandchildren while their mother works.

Milton believes he first began losing his eyesight sometime prior to the year 2000 when he noticed cars honking at him while driving. As it turned out, he had lost so much eyesight from glaucoma that he was not able to see some of the other cars on the streets and roads he was driving on. Glaucoma has been referred to as the "sneak thief of eyesight" because it impairs eyesight so gradually that it often goes unnoticed until it's too late. An earlier setback for Milton occurred when cancer forced him to retire from a major furniture chain in 1987 after working for the company as a warehouse employee for 19 years.

Milton sought help from the Lighthouse's Winter Haven facility and attended daily living skills classes to help him regain his ability to carry out household tasks such as meal preparation, clothing care, and managing his finances. He also took orientation and mobility so that he could travel through-

out the community using the bus system. He also became proficient at street crossings using his long cane. It seemed as though he was off and running as soon as he learned enough mobility to get around. He received a closed circuit television system (CCTV) from Division of Blind Services to help him prepare Sunday school lessons, pay his bills, read his mail, and carry out other reading tasks. He also received a special radio receiver from the Radio Reading Service so that he could listen to media available only in print such as newspaper articles that are read by volunteers. He enjoys listening to sports coverage including football, baseball, and other sporting events.

As impressive as Milton's success is in regaining his independence, the vast majority of the Lighthouse's graduates are successful at becoming independent in their homes and communities. Milton, however, exhibits a high energy level and an unusual degree of mobility which he commendably uses for the benefit of others.

NEW "A STATE OF VISION" SPECIALTY AUTO TAG TO PROVIDE FUNDING FOR FLORIDA'S PRIVATE AGENCIES SERVING THE BLIND



The new license tags are expected to be available for purchase at your local Florida auto tag agencies by February, 2007

On June 23, 2006, Governor Bush signed the House Bill 281 authorizing this new specialty license plate to benefit Floridians who are blind or visually impaired. This was after extensive efforts by the Florida Association of Agencies Serving the Blind (FAASB) to design and promote the brightly colored new plate with the inscription that reads "A STATE OF VISION." State Representative Dennis Baxley (R-Ocala), the plate's prime sponsor, attributes his interest to his son, Jeffery, who is visually im-

paired. His efforts were supported by State Senator Carey Baker (R-Eustis). These plates are expected to be available by February of 2007. This will be the only plate out of 100 specialty plates in Florida that will benefit persons who are blind or visually impaired. FAASB agencies will receive the \$25 voluntary user fee each time a plate is purchased or renewed. A recent analysis estimates that the new plate will raise more than \$770,000 for FAASB agencies (which includes Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind) over a 5 year period.

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January 15

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Day observed (closed)

February 10

Low Vision Expo
8:30 a.m. - 12:00 noon
Christ the King Catholic Church
821 S. Dale Mabry Hwy.
Tampa, FL 33609
Call (813) 251-2407 for more
information

April - May (TBA)

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May 28

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