

Gatewave: Reinventing a Radio Service for the Blind

By Gordon Williams

His voice is rich, friendly and familiar. He's been the voice for Macy's, announcer for the Oscars and every morning he opens NBC's Today Show. Each Thursday afternoon he goes into his home studio for another important vocal assignment, as a volunteer for a nonprofit audio service called Gatewave.

"This is 'About Your Health.' I'm Les Marshak. Welcome aboard." For the next hour, Marshak records articles about health news that will be heard by thousands of people who are blind or visually impaired, in New York City and around the country.

One devoted listener is Mary Najdek of Queens, New York. She used to drive a limousine before a rare genetic condition robbed her of her central vision. She finds Gatewave indispensable. "It's definitely an education." If the service were to disappear, she says, "It would be like shutting down the New York Times. I would have to depend on television, and that's horrible." Najdek knows that more technically savvy people can access information through screen readers and other devices. But

she's studied such tools and, at age 67, concedes that she'll probably never master them.

Gatewave is on a mission: to make the service available to as many listeners as possible and to provide listeners with relevant information that they would find hard to get anywhere else.

The service is available 24 hours a day through more than 3000 special radios in the New York area, in local hospitals and nursing homes, through a dozen other reading services in other parts of the country and through the mobile app iBlink Radio. Visually impaired persons can apply for internet access through gatewaye.org.

And as of December subscribers can hear, nationwide, the National Federation of the Blind's NFB Newsline telephone service.

"Within the year, we hope to have digital television distribution as well," says executive director Gordon Rothman. "It's important that we have multiple ways of getting our programs to listeners. New York skyscrapers make the radios hard to hear in some places, and many visually impaired people don't have internet access."

The growth of Gatewave reached an important milestone with the election in September of John F. Robinson as president of its board of directors. Twenty-one years ago, when Robinson was already CEO and President of the National Minority Business Council, he lost his eyesight to a detached retina. He received a radio that picked up "In Touch," the predecessor to Gatewave. "Right from the beginning," says Robinson, "it was imperative for me to read the paper daily." Ever since, the 7 am broadcast of The New York Times and the 8 am broadcast of The Wall Street Journal have



Les Marshak

been an essential part of his daily routine.

When he became a Gatewave officer, Robinson told the board that he looked forward to "giving back" for the value he's received from the service over the years. Serving with Robinson on the board are Marshak, Gatewave's former president; executive director Gail Starkey; college disabilities counselor Karen Perlman; attorney Mark Manewitz; broadcast engineer John Lyons and golf executive Joseph Bellantoni.

Though Gatewave is only five years old, its roots go back to 1978. Jim Jones, a Wall Street investor with failing eyesight, created "In Touch" so he

could stay informed with in-depth coverage without needing people to read to him. It became part of the Jewish Guild for the Blind in the 1990s.

Starkey, station manager at In Touch for 15 years, was struck by the connections made between readers and listeners. "Over the years," she recalls, "I spoke to people who would say to me that it's not only the information they receive or get from the service but it's the feeling that somebody is on their side." Recognizing the value of that connection, Starkey was shaken to learn that in the midst of the national financial meltdown, JGB planned to shut down the service in 2009.

Along with veteran engineer Richard Koziol, Starkey embarked on the reinvention of the service as a standalone system. Once In Touch left the air, they launched an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit charity, arranging to deliver the new service to as many previous listeners as possible. But with the studios at Jewish Guild shut down, they needed a brand-new system for creating programs.

With internet connections as the backbone, they leveraged the power of volunteer talent and in-kind contributions from small businesses. Emax Computer Systems in Ottawa, Canada, was recruited to maintain Gatewave's website and server. Scheid Technologies of Lancaster, Pennsylvania agreed to manage the program sequencer which puts each broadcast on the air at the right time, then sends it to the New York transmitter, the web and affiliates.

Lucky Duck Productions, owned by journalist Linda Ellerbee, donated studio time. Audio production house Mixopolis chipped in with editing and recording help. But most of the work is done by volunteers recording and editing in their own homes. And not just in New York. Readers contribute programs from as far as Buffalo, Dallas and Ashland, Oregon.

Together, volunteers create six new hours of programming a day, from daily newspapers to news-magazines such as *The Economist* and *Time*, and also health, science, sports, and celebrity news.

For executive director Rothman, one critical goal for the coming year is beefing up the content. "Historically, we've focused on content that would interest both blind and sighted people. Now we're adding more material that addresses the specific interests of our audience." To that end, Rothman is drawing on experience and contacts from 30 years as a producer at CBS News. He's recruited veteran writers, researchers and voice talent to build a unit that's gathering news about blindness and disabilities for a long-running weekly series "Our World."

With the help of the Catholic Guild for the Blind, Gatewave is employing a researcher to collect



information about local events and resources to be broadcast at the end of its programs.

"You're a lifeline to us," says listener Dorothy Ambrose. "Gatewave makes it comfortable for me to keep up with current news, and the announcements are clear and informative. It is a wonderful way to start my day." Ambrose, a visually impaired resident of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, hears the service over the Keystone Radio Network, one of Gatewave's affiliates.

Each affiliate pays a fee to Gatewave or provides in-kind services. In addition to Lancaster, this arrangement makes the programming available throughout New Jersey, Mississippi and Alabama and in parts of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Florida and Maryland.

In addition to affiliate fees, Gatewave's main financial source is individual contributions. In 2015, the organization plans to solicit corporations to underwrite programs in the style of public broadcasters, and to apply for government support and foundation grants.

According to one recent statistic cited by the American Foundation for the Blind, there are four million blind or partially blind adults in America, of whom 75% are not in the labor force. AFB President and CEO Carl Augusto, in a letter of support for Gatewave, noted the importance of the radio service to these people. "There is simply no other source of that kind of information for a large segment of the population with vision loss... It deserves

the support of the community and the financial support of corporations, foundations and individuals interested in ensuring people with vision loss are not shut off from society."

