



Lanna Slaby: Teacher of the Visually Impaired



Hello and greetings from my Outreach Office at the Jamestown Business Center. I have often referred to myself as the Maytag repairman being the lone Teacher of the Visually Impaired in a 6 county area. These words are even more true today with COVID-19 affecting our services.

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The Jamestown Business Center has been my office home since 2000 when I started in this position. I was the first Outreach Coordinator hired specifically for Region 6 which includes an area of six counties. When I was hired initially, I served ages 0 to adult. Then around 2007, our school designated adult service providers so my contact

with adults is pretty limited now. I mainly work with the early intervention population 0-3 and then school age 4-21. A large part of my job is completing Functional Visual Evaluations and providing recommendations and strategies to IEP teams to ensure the student is successful in accessing the curriculum. In the 0-3 age group, it's about providing supports and resources to families and developing appropriate strategies to help the child make use of their vision and if necessary, sensory substitutions like tactual learning.

My road to becoming a TVI was due to a former teaching colleague, Connie Osowski, who became a TVI and worked at NDVS/SB. Connie and I used to teach in Wing, ND and she suggested that I take a look at the vision program at UND. In the summer of 1998, I began taking vision courses over IVN, an interactive video network program. The following summer, we traveled to Grand Forks to finish out the required course work to earn our credential/endorsement as a Teacher of the Visually Impaired.

I earned my first degree at Mary College, now the University of Mary. Back in my day, (I know an annoying statement for younger people) we didn't have high school counselors to help us with career and college choices. It was at the last minute that I decided to go Mary College. I remember seeing on my schedule that nursing was listed as my de-

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REACHING OUT

Everyday Accessibility: By Amy L. Osvold

I am often asked by my clients, “is this product accessible?” It is often hard to know before you purchase an item if you will be able to use a product independently once you get it home from the store or receive the package in the mail. The latest addition to the Osvold household is the Emmerson Sensi Smart Wi-Fi Thermostat that can be used with Alexa. The model I purchased from Amazon is the ST55 model that cost \$92.31. I did hours of research on which thermostat to purchase. This one had had a 4.5-star rating with 4,766 customer ratings. As part of my research when purchasing new products, I carefully consider the reviews. Unfortunately, most/all of them are done by people who do not have vision loss. Very rarely do you find a review by someone with vision loss, for someone with vision loss.

The good...It said it was do-it-yourself but was it really? I thought I was going to have to have an HVAC person come and install it. It did say on the box and in the reviews that many people installed it themselves. On Good Friday, I saw Brian (my husband) standing in the hallway with the old thermostat off. My only thought was, “I hope that truly is a DIY thermostat or we are going to have a very chilly Easter!” And it would be DIY for someone with vision. According to Brian, for someone with no or low vision the small wires would be difficult to see.

I was not able to find a review that said it was compatible with VoiceOver. There are many products out there that will say they

work with IOS, but VoiceOver is often another story. For the most part, it is compatible. First, you must download the app. Once you have set up the app, you create an account. Once the app and the thermostat are linked, it will allow you to use your phone to raise and lower the temperature, switch between heat or cool, turn on the fan, and set a schedule.

Will it really work with Alexa? Once Alexa has the skill you can use your voice to raise and lower the temperature. You do have to go to the Alexa app and set up the skill. Some of the reviewers said they had some difficulty with Alexa and the thermostat not being able to communicate, but I have not had difficulty with that.

The bad...It isn't just as easy as sitting in your recliner and yelling at Alexa to raise or lower the temperature. Like all Alexa devices, you must use a specific set of commands. For example, “Alexa, raise the temperature 1 degree” not “Alexa, raise the temperature.” Also, you must be able to work between the Alexa and the Sensi App in order to run it if it happens to lose connectivity. You do have to be somewhat tech savvy. You must know VoiceOver very well to use the app.

There are some people that say in the reviews that it will run without a “C” wire, you will just go through more batteries. Fortunately, we did have a “C” wire, so that was not an issue for us.

In order to run the app, you do have to be fluent with VoiceOver.

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When setting a schedule, there is a submenu where you can set different temperatures for the time of day and the day of the week. Unfortunately, the temperature up and down in this area is not VoiceOver compatible. I was trying to figure a way around it and accidentally set our overnight temperature to 62 degrees. It was a bit of a frosty morning at the Osvold house!

One morning I woke up and wanted to turn the temperature up, but the thermostat and my phone were not “speaking” to each other. To fix it, I just went to the App Switcher and did a “hard close” and it reset itself.

If you have any questions about this device or want to have me review any other products, please feel free to contact me at 701-857-7635 or abrunner@nd.gov.



REACHING OUT

Superintendent's Scoop: Paul Olson

This year has dealt us an interesting hand that perhaps we could only imagine as a bad dream a short time ago. The upheaval in our lives due to COVID-19 is unprecedented in recent generations and no one knows for certain what the coming weeks and months will bring. We certainly hope for a return to what we considered normal and pray that people who have been infected recover successfully. For NDVS/SB the primary concerns are the safety of those we serve and the well-being of our staff. I could not be more proud of our NDVS/SB staff! The majority are telecommuting, and all have risen to the challenge of our new, temporary normal. As for those we serve, we are seeing resilience on the part of students, creative adaptation by instructors and new collaborations unfolding. It turns out we have been poised to make better use of distance learning technology, stretching our abilities and ever more readiness for collaboration between organizations. A good example of this is a weekly phone-based "Coffee Chat," that provides an opportunity for adult consumers to visit about how they are doing under these unusual circumstances. This is a collaboration with the ND Association of the Blind.

It has been both a little nerve-racking and exciting witnessing the rollout of new ways of doing things, but it has been truly impressive. The resulting ingenuity and enthusiasm has been infectious (just a little pun intended). These promising signs in no way diminish the devastating nature of the pandemic and the lives lost and changed will hurt forever. It is highly likely many will feel the pain of economic hardship as well. Notwithstanding the

very challenging circumstances, there is no going back! We are going to continue to adapt and work together. We are going to push the envelope of innovation in ways that we had a hard time imagining just a couple months ago. There is no way we will completely return to normal practices because we have all been changed.



Whether you're a student, a family member of a student, or, a partner in service, know that the dedicated staff of North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind continues to work on your behalf. As mentioned before the majority of our staff are working from home, but our core services continue. In fact, we have been working hard to connect with those we serve and new in exciting ways. We will continue in our mission by providing individualized services and resources to infants, children, and adults with visual impairment to empower them in achieving their goals

Continuing Core Services:

- Consulting with our public-school partners
- Collaborating with parents by phone calls, texts and video conferencing
- Providing materials and equipment to support education
- Attending IEP meetings via videoconferencing
- Providing video lessons with students of all ages

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- Calling and checking on adult clients by providing a good listening ear and a supporting word
- Conducting a weekly group “coffee chat” over the phone with adults in collaboration with the ND Association of the Blind
- Our non-profit NDVS/SB Store is sending essential aids and appliances through the mail as usual.

In conclusion, please know that we hope to return to our schedule this Summer and Fall with short-term programs for students and adults. We will provide updates through our website and through our Facebook page.

Take care and be well, Paul Olson

Braille Access Center: Leslie Pederson

Lately in the Braille Access Center I've been creating stick-in braille to assist with a new set of interactive books being made by our Region 4 Coordinator Sandy Brandt. NDVS/SB has purchased two copies of the 25 book Elephant and Piggie series by Mo Williams which will have braille and other interactive elements added. This is the beginning of a tactile library the literacy team is creating, starting with where our TVIs have found gaps for students. This series is being made specifically for the early emergent braille reader.

Sandy thought these books were a perfect fit for the project because they have high repetition, build early success, and have lots and lots of high frequency words. The reading patterns are fairly predictable but the ending is not. They also have a wonderful humor in them which will hook kids on early reading. We can get them past the struggle if the reading is fun and it keeps them guessing to the end.

Each book is in 30-point font and will have stick-in braille. They will include audio sound dots that give an audio description through a

Pen Friend. These fun descriptions help students who are braille users understand the humor in the pictures. For our students who are low vision, the pictures are de-

lightful and clutter free. Simple tactiles on each page will also add to the joy of reading. Ten books are geared to the end of kindergarten and fifteen books are designed for the beginning of first grade.

More books and tactile materials will be created in the future through volunteers and the literacy team. The goal is to create a Legacy Library so we have readily available tactile materials to use in new books or other projects for students. These books will become available as completed with the target date of the beginning of the 20/21 school year. They will be available for short term loan with a Pen Friend if the school or parent does not have one.



clared degree. I remember asking myself, do I want to be a nurse? In high school, I really enjoyed sports and I thought I wanted to do something where I can still be involved in sports so this steered me to education. I earned my Bachelor Degree in Elementary Education and Physical Education and later I added my Kindergarten Endorsement.

This article probably should have been about celebrating my 20 years with NDSB and all the memorable happenings and technological changes that have occurred since I started. I have been so fortunate to work along side so many dedicated and passionate staff members. And it goes without saying, the lessons I've learned from my students and families has been my best teacher.



Along the way I've met a few prominent individuals in this field, two of which I was fortunate enough to snap a picture with. Below is Dr. Phil Hatlen, a legend in the field of vision. He is known for many successes and one that stands out for me is the Expanded Core Curriculum. This picture was taken when Dr. Hatlen was Superintendent at the Texas School for the Blind. The 2nd picture is with Dr. Lilli Nielson who is known for her educational approach called Active Learning. She authored many books on blindness and learning for children with multiple disabilities.

I think it's appropriate to close with one of Helen Keller's famous quotes, "Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much," as in this field, it really takes a collaborative effort to create a successful educational journey for our students.

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