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## Lois M. Fontana Charitable Foundation Will Expand BTBL Recording Studio

By MIKE DEL ROSSO

When Lois Fontana worked as an investment analyst, she saw the art in investing. Now retired, she gives two hours per week to narrating digital audio books for the Perkins Braille & Talking Book Library (BTBL) recording studio. In her narration, she listens for the art.

“It gives me the opportunity to express the hidden actress in me. I can emote and inflect,” Lois said. “It was a challenge, an aesthetic or artistic challenge, as well as an intellectual challenge. How can I control my voice and my inflections to express the author’s intent, as well as to breathe life into the book and make it a story that someone really enjoys listening to?”

The recording studio housed within the BTBL provides digital audio books—local titles for its main collection that are then shared with the National Library Service (NLS) and custom audio books for anything from a student’s math textbook to narration of Mass. Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) documents made readable for customers who are blind or otherwise print disabled. For someone who can’t read print books, the recording studio thus opens up an entire world of knowledge that they would otherwise have no access to.

“We don’t have the option of going out and buying a book that’s been recorded already. Of course there are commercial audio books, but those tend to be bestsellers, popular romances, mysteries and spy stories... yet you can’t build a library collection on only these topics,” said BTBL Director Kim Charlson.

Kim said, in order to have an adequate collection of digital audio library books, they have to record all kinds of titles; it has to be balanced. The BTBL gets a lot of these through their affiliation with the NLS, but they cater to a national audience. If someone in this region wants to read a book about New England—the Red Sox or a book chronicling all the spooky haunts in and around the Greater Boston Area—they will most likely only find these recordings in the BTBL. To record these books, they need volunteer narrators like Lois Fontana, who believes in the recording program so much, she is giving a lot more than her time and her voice.

What began as a “beautiful friendship,” Lois said, seven years ago when Lois began narrating for the studio, has thus evolved into the Lois M. Fontana Charitable Foundation, Inc., which will work to develop Perkins recording studio’s custom books program, as well as aid in the production of titles for their main collection, focusing on books related to the New England area. With Lois and her foundation’s help, the library will be able to increase their output of 100 digital books per year to about 150 titles, said Director of the BTBL Recording Studio Robert Pierson.

Right now, the BTBL serves 25,000 patrons, but there are 100,000 people, in the region, who could benefit from their services. Not just people who are blind or visually impaired, the BTBL recording studio can allow people with dyslexia or people who are physically disabled and can’t hold print books the opportunity to read (or listen). Perhaps they just don’t know they qualify for our services. It’s through people like Lois M. Fontana, that the library and recording studio will reach them.

“The recording studio has grown so much,” Robert said. “And now, with Lois and the foundation, we can actually get help to make it more manageable and efficient and continue to grow the custom program with higher-quality standards.”

Within the first phase of the foundation’s business plan, the BTBL will hire a 20-hour per week employee who will aid in eliminating the backlog of the 40-45 digital books that remain in post-production, while another 50 are actively being recorded in the studio by any one of the 70 volunteer narrators that the library commissions. This person is already in high demand for the many levels of production, post-production and finalization any of these books undergoes. It will be no small feat to increase digital-audio book production by 50 percent, while maintaining the BTBL recording studio’s high level of quality, which sets the bar high for digital audio recording.

“We’re one of the first studios to go into digital book production,” Robert said. “Now satellite programs around the country seek out our well-reputed expertise to learn how to record books digitally.”

### A Meticulous Process

For digital books, which will be added to the main collection, teams of two (a narrator and a monitor) work together within a two-hour window of time each week. Each narrates their respective book for an hour, while the other monitors the narration for mistakes.



The monitor listens in on the narration inside the booth and chimes in via the pencil microphone whenever a mistake is made.

very, very detail oriented.”

Once errors have been removed from the audio files, the BTBL can then build the digital book in software called Book Wizard Producer, where navigation is set to make the book easily readable for the listener. This navigation is tailored to each book. A cookbook, for instance, may contain two levels of navigation: by chapter and by recipe (in alphabetical order).

“There’s not much room for error when we bring all of these loose files to the finalizing software,” Robert said. “If we make mistakes while building the digital book from its files, we may need to start the finalization process over.”

Producing a digital audio book in this fashion can take six months to a year.

There’s no limit to the benefits this service provides for people who need to listen to audio information instead of reading print. The BTBL has contracts with such large organizations as the MBTA, which requested custom audio materials so that their passengers with visual impairments can read important documents (e.g. bus schedules), and the Registry of Motor Vehicles, for which Robert is producing a Spanish-language driver’s manual that will be added to the library’s main collection. For Spanish-speaking people with dyslexia, now they can now learn the laws related to driving. Essentially, “when a patron puts the digital audio book in their player, they can navigate through it easily, skip chapters, back up, like you would want to go through a visual book,” said Kim Charlson, Director of Perkins BTBL, who not only oversees the production and lending of these books, she listens to them herself as a patron who is blind.

In her career as an investment analyst, Lois acknowledged artful intuition as integral for recommending sound investments. In her new life as a narrator, she continues to draw parallels between the two worlds. Her years cultivating intuitive skills led to establishing her foundation, which will support and expand the BTBL’s custom recordings program—yet another *sound* investment and, from which, the return is “priceless,” she says.



Lois M. Fontana



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Once initial production is complete, the entire audio file (anywhere from eight to 12 to 20 hours of recordings, depending on the length of the book) will go through a lengthy period of post production. The part-time person will make the file easier to read; they’ll get rid of digital section markers; they’ll make it flow better; and then they’ll put chapter marks and page marks into the files. These steps make the audio easier for “proof listeners” to digest. These people listen for background noises and additional mistakes.

“The microphone is so sensitive, you can sometimes hear stomach growls, jewelry rattling, as well as using the wrong words or flubs,” Robert said. “The whole process is



The narrator sits in a sound-proof booth to record digital audio books.

#### Careers

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