Hadley

Braille for Everyday Tasks

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** There may be lots of room for braille in your life, even if you don't use it to read books. In this episode, braille support manager Danette Johnson, along with Hadley members, Jeff and Audrey, join us to discuss learning braille for everyday use. I'm Ricky Enger, and this is Hadley Presents. Made possible by Hadley’s donors. Whose support brings you expert perspectives on vision loss. Welcome to the show everyone.

**Jeff:** Hello.

**Danette Johnson:** Hi. It's great to be here.

**Audrey:** Great to be here.

**Ricky Enger:** It is amazing to have you all and wow, do we ever have a lot to talk about? I've been looking forward to doing this podcast all day. So, before we jump into talking about braille, which is one of my favorite things, I want to just take a moment to kind of let everyone introduce themselves so that we all can put a name with a voice. Danette, let's start with you. Tell us a bit about who you are and what you do here at Hadley.

**Danette Johnson:** Yeah, great. As mentioned, my name is Danette Johnson and I'm the braille specialist and braille support manager here at Hadley. And I have the pleasure of speaking to our members about braille and answering questions and sharing tips and strategies for learning and reading braille. I also had the privilege of helping to develop and write our braille programs here at Hadley, so I'm really glad to be here and talk about it today.

**Ricky Enger:** Awesome. So, Audrey, you are next. Tell us a bit about yourself and if you like, you can touch kind of on your vision loss as well.

**Audrey:** I lost my vision three years ago in an accident. It was a gradual loss. It took me two years to finally admit that I really was losing my vision, and I needed help. And so I started reaching out in every way that I could find and learning braille became very important to me because I loved to travel, and I realized that if I'm traveling by myself and sometimes I do, I would need to be able to read the elevator and read the room numbers. And so, it became very important to me to learn braille. I've struggled a lot called Danette a lot, and if it wasn't for Danette for encouragement, I probably would've quit. But I've kind of adapted my own way to learn and am succeeding.

**Ricky Enger:** I love it. And you have jumped just right into that practical way that braille is going to fit into your life. That's perfect. Jeff, tell us a bit about you and kind of your vision loss journey and how you got started learning braille.

**Jeff:** So my name is Jeff. I live in Oregon, and my vision loss journey started two years ago, and I was 49. I was brought to the emergency room with 20/20 vision while currently experiencing covid. And I went in because I was having severe and debilitating headaches that were getting worse by the hour after a scan and an examination, it was determined that I was having a stroke as well. I woke up five and a half weeks later after a coma in another hospital with my wife explaining to me that I'm now blind. And for me, I didn't experience the five weeks, it was just I went in with 20/20 and I woke up blind. It was a whole new world and there's a long story between the Oregon Commission for the Blind reaching out to me and them setting me up with a Hadley account.

And when I was first home from the hospital, I just spent all my time listening to all the workshops and I kept thinking, I'm too old to learn braille at 49. And Hadley actually said, “Well, you're not too old on braille. People learn it much older than you.”

I took that to heart, and I started doing all the workshops on braille. And it turns out for me personally, it was a lot of fun because to me it was like a puzzle game, and it also gave me something to do because I was very limited in what I could do when I first went blind. So that's my story.

**Ricky Enger:** Well, there you go. It's so good that each of you came into this with kind of a thing that motivated you to start. Danette, I'm curious, we've said that our program here is called braille for everyday use. So that almost implies that, I mean, you would think, well, if I'm going to learn braille, am I going to use it every day? If I'm reading, I guess I would. Is there something different about braille for everyday use that would maybe set it apart from some traditional programs and ways to learn braille? What did we design this to be?

**Danette Johnson:** Well, you're exactly right, Ricky. We named it Braille for Everyday Use because that's really what we focus on from the beginning. A lot of times programs throw a lot of symbols at you, a large amount at one time because the end goal maybe is to read braille books. But we wanted to take a look at braille in another way. How can I use braille from the start? From the very first letter, from the very first symbol that I use. I want this to be a practical thing, otherwise I might not stick with this. It's too big, it's too overwhelming. And we found that focusing on how you can use it immediately and simply would be just adding another tool to that toolbox to help you thrive. So yeah, our program, braille for everyday use is designed to introduce braille in this easily digestible way that isn't overwhelming and focuses on these practical uses of braille.

We discussed braille using braille from the very first letter for things like labeling around your home such as your pantry items, your electrical panel, so which switches to flip your pet food containers or for example, just using one or two letters like putting the letter A on your aspirin bottle and the letter T on your Tylenol bottle to be able to tell those apart. So, it is very practical, simple uses for braille. And then we talk about things like reading the elevator buttons as Audrey mentioned, and restroom signs so you know that you're going in the right restroom when you're out for dinner, just every day, kind of things like that.

So yeah, we only introduce three or four letters or symbols at a time, so you get plenty of practice and it doesn't feel overwhelming before we add more letters. We even provide those little stickers with the letters so you can use them immediately and stick with them on things around your home to help. And I think that that too is a little bit different than some other programs just introducing a few things at a time to make it digestible and make you feel confident and comfortable. And then it feels like braille is purposeful from the get-go.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, it makes a lot of sense because even if you learn the braille alphabet, if you're learning the alphabet just sort of for its own sake, maybe you haven't thought about, well, where is this going to fit in my daily life other than say reading books, but this is a very practical approach. And Audrey, this was your actual motivation to start, elevator buttons and things like that. Do you remember when you started, you had this in mind, you wanted to use it to read signs, to read hotel room numbers. Do you remember the first time that it really, really clicked or you found a specific motivation to keep going. Do you remember a moment where it kind of clicked for you?

**Audrey:** I do. I remember that I realized when you were talking about labeling, how I could make my life easier by learning braille and labeling things in my home that I really didn't know what they were. I'm 75 years old, so when you say that braille can be learned at any age, I want to say yes because it may not be as easy for a 75-year-old as it is for a 49-year-old, but I haven't lost my ability to learn because of my I. And realizing that braille could make my life easier in so many more ways has kept me going.

**Ricky Enger:** So well said. We hear it a lot. I'm too old or this is going to be too hard, but you're so right, you haven't lost your capability, and you haven't lost that willingness, that zest for learning. And so, you came in excited for one reason and now you're finding other reasons too, labeling things in your house, so it fits in your life, which is wonderful. Jeff, what about you? Can you remember a moment when it went from, I am learning this, it's kind of a puzzle, I'm having fun too, oh, I can actually see this being useful. Did you have a practical thing that you sort of started with?

**Jeff:** I actually do oddly enough for me, my first use for braille practically was I wanted to actually write in braille because part of the medical issue I had that caused my blindness also made my fingers numb neuropathy at the fingertips. So, I was having a more difficult time advancing reading it, but I did want to write it. And the practical use for that at the time was it was Christmas time and I wanted to say a little something to a young niece that I have who's 11 years old because I had had a difficult year and she was worried for me and I just wanted a way to connect and I wanted to say, Hey, look, I can do this. I can write in braille. You may not understand what this is but let me explain to you. I'll write your name in braille; I'll write your school’s name in braille.

And it was just a way for me to kind of connect and say, I'm learning new things, so when you feel like you don't want to learn in school or it's difficult or something like that, just know that at my age I'm still doing it. You can too. And I wrote her a little Merry Christmas and everything else there. And that was the first practical use I had for it in that sense. Other practical uses, yes, there's elevator buttons and there was also labeling around the house. I got ahold of a braille label maker once I advanced enough through the Hadley workshops, and I started labeling everything I could think of. Those were very practical early on as well as being able to read braille on certain devices and paperwork that was being sent to me now by various blind organizations like Talking Books for the Blind and such. That was practical for me too, trying to understand what I was just sent.

**Ricky Enger:** That's awesome. And Audrey, for you, how is Braille fitting into your life now? So, you've progressed a bit and you've mentioned labeling things in your home. Have you had a chance to practice what you came into this for, reading those signs as you're out and about? Where's braille fitting in now for you?

**Audrey:** It's actually fitting in. Well, yes, I've had a chance to read the signs outside my home and in my home. I do practice my braille every day, but I do it at different times during the day because I have a very busy life, and so I fit brail in where it fits, but I make sure to do it because it has become a love. I'm actually reading words and phrases and thank you Danette for sending those to me. That has been, I want to say my connection. It really kind of spurred me on and encouraged me to keep going and keep learning. I still struggle with some of the letters, but I have learned how to, in a word, feel each individual letter. And so, I'm spelling the letters out as I'm reading the words as well. I think my older mind is probably a little slower, but that's not a problem. I'm just going to keep going.

**Ricky Enger:** I love it. Jeff, you have mentioned a couple of ways that braille is fitting into your life too, and for you, you mentioned writing, so braille and technology I think has been a nice fit for you. Can you talk about where braille is fitting in your life in terms of using it with technology?

**Jeff:** Yes, I can actually. When I first started using a slate and stylus, that was a big push for me in braille because that was my first experience writing braille. And that actually helped a lot with the learning process of braille. I'd have to learn every letter and also learn how to write it backwards, and it really helped cement what the letters were, and I was really excited for that because it was so helpful for me. And nowadays I use technology as well as a slate and stylus for certain types of practice. But with technology, I use an Apple iPhone, and it has a feature called Braille Screen Input, and I think Samsung has a similar version and braille screen input. It allows you to use a touch screen, not an actual physical braille keyboard or any other physical keyboard, but a touch screen in braille mode.

It just maps where your fingers are and you can reset the mapping whenever you want, but it allows you to type the braille symbols, and it will then translate it into written text that a cited person will see. So for example, I use braille screen input every single day to not only write very quick texts, especially if I'm in mixed company, I don't want to interrupt a discussion that's happening somewhere else, like at a meeting that I have for a blind support group locally, I don't necessarily want to cut in, but this will allow me to type on screen on my phone

**Ricky Enger:** Instead of dictating that out loud.

**Jeff:** Instead of dictating it. And I do actually use hearing aids, so it pumps the sound of the letters through my hearing aids, but otherwise you could use earbuds or headphones if you want to keep it silent because otherwise people will hear a B, is a good thing. I love the ability to do that because one thing I have difficulty doing is taking notes during these meetings. If someone's giving very useful information for the blind and such, and this is a quick way for me to do it. And contracted braille especially is quick because it shortens everything. I really thoroughly enjoy that as well as taking notes, sending texts, writing brief emails and stuff. I really love that aspect and I have found it extremely useful in that regard as far as writing in both ways goes. Yes.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, that's really great. It's a way to enter your stuff without kind of fiddling around with the touchscreen. And even if you can still see the touchscreen to some degree, a lot of people find this a much quicker and more private way, as you mentioned, without having to dictate things or squint down at the screen if you're trying to use your vision, learning that quick method of input. Danette, Audrey already touched on this to some degree, kind of talking about getting those practice things sent out and ways to practice or to keep you going when things are getting a little bit hard. It is overwhelming when you're first learning something, and I think it's easy to get discouraged if you don't have someone in your corner. So, what kind of support do we offer at Hadley so that people are not just doing this alone?

**Danette Johnson:** Yes, you're absolutely right, Ricky. And we have a couple of different ways that people can get connected and get that support, so they don't feel they're alone. We really don't want anyone to think they're out on their own on this braille journey. And so, we have braille specialists here to answer your questions. As I mentioned, at any time you can call email from something as simple as, what was the answer on this page? I missed it. Or I'm not sure I'm holding out my hands right, or I'm not feeling these correctly, or I can't identify this letter. Call and ask questions and we can discuss tips and strategies to help you be successful.

And then we also have a monthly discussion group on the first Thursday of every month called Embracing Braille and people can join by Zoom or by phone. And in that group we discuss a braille related topic each month and members can share their own tips and strategies as well as that's a good chance to ask questions of other people who are going through the same thing or have been through the same process and have been in your position and learning braille.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, I always think that's so helpful, just that community aspect of encouraging each other or a new person comes in and they're feeling like, I'm never going to learn all this, and then three months later they are the person jumping in with a suggestion, Hey, here's what helped me. I always love watching that in action.

So, as we're wrapping up, I'm just wondering if someone is out there and they're listening and they're like, wow, Audrey's doing great. Jeff's doing great, and I'm sure Danette is really encouraging, but I just don't know if I can do this. I don't know if this is for me. As we're wrapping up, what's something that each of you would say to that person who's sort of on the fence? So, Audrey, we'll start with you.

**Audrey:** I have a mentor who is learning braille and so on our mentor calls, sometimes we will talk about our difficulties with braille or our successes with braille. That has also been very helpful for me. I have two people who in my life have taught braille and I can ask them questions. I want you to know Danette is a wonderful source. The specialists at Hadley are very encouraging. I wouldn't want someone to not think that they can't do it because of their inability to learn. You can go as quickly or as slowly as you want to, and you can go through those lessons as many times as you wish and really learn the letters. I've had to go through some of those lessons and probably will go back and do them again because I want to make sure that I know the letters.

And I just want to encourage people who want to learn braille. You can do it.

**Ricky Enger:** Thank you so much, Audrey. I love it. Okay, Jeff, you're up. What would you say to someone who's saying, I don't know if this is for me. I don't know if I can.

**Jeff:** Yeah, I was that person. I didn't think I could because I mentioned a little earlier my fingertips were numb because of neuropathy after my stroke, I just didn't think it'd be even possible. But I started slowly gaining a little sensitivity in certain fingers, and it turns out that now I have one finger that is pretty much my primary braille reader. It's the middle finger on my right hand. That's how I read all my braille. It's very effective. I'm sure it would be more effective if all my fingers worked, but that's the one I've got.

And I'm reading braille. I'm very slow at reading contracted braille, but I'm adequate at reading standard braille at the moment because of the practice that I've really been putting in. And I faced a limitation and it discouraged me early on, but I found another way around it where even if I can't read it, I would like to communicate at it because I'm also trying to think of vocational things that I can do, translating things to braille maybe for the blind and such.

Well, it turns out that I can actually read it adequately now, and I'm really glad that I took the time, even though I had the limitation early on of reading it because of physical reasons. I'm really glad I took the time to learn it anyway, to actually produce it, because now I can do both.

That I think as well as there are many practical uses for that I've had, and one little story that I like to tell is I was so happy the first time I learned the symbol for the apostrophe. Why? Because I have family from the south and they like to use the word well. Now I can properly write the word y'all, where before if I was writing something like that, I wouldn't be able to spell it correctly. And the reason that's important is because if I'm writing a text message and braille screen input, they see it on their screen, a standard text, and I can input it correctly and they'll get it correctly.

**Ricky Enger:** You get to communicate in exactly the way you want.

**Jeff:** Yes

**Ricky Enger:** Thank you.

**Jeff:** I even know braille symbols where I'll just type the happy face, right? Parentheses.

**Ricky Enger:** There you go. Danette, you talk to people every day. So, I know just some of that discouragement that people can have or some of the reasons they think about not doing it. What would your thoughts for the person who's not quite ready to pick up the phone?

**Danette Johnson:** Well, I want people to just consider that braille can be just another tool in their toolbox, and they're never too old to learn. And whether they want to just learn enough to mark the buttons or dials on their washing machine, or if they want to hold and read a book, again, braille can be for everyone. There’re so many different uses for it, and we're here to help.

**Ricky Enger:** Awesome. And if you're wondering then how to get started with braille, the process is really easy. You can just give us a call, 800-323-4238, and we will get you set up with getting started. The way it will work is you'll get your first braille workbook, and along with that you'll be listening to some audio that's going to tell you what am I supposed to be doing with this braille workbook? And I hope that you will be encouraged if this is something that you've considered before or maybe it's something you thought you really couldn't do and it just wasn't on your radar, perhaps this discussion has changed your mind. So, give us a call. We'd love to have you learning to read braille by joining us in our braille discussion group, and we're very encouraging if things look a little overwhelming, so give us a call. Thank you so much to all of you for joining us. We had a very full virtual room, but it's been a delightful time. Thank you all.

**Danette Johnson:** Thank you, Ricky.

**Jeff:** Thank you.

**Audrey**: Thank you.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadleyhelps.org. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @hadleyhelps.org or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.