



Reading Eyes

Central Kentucky Radio Eye Brings News to Visually and Physically Impaired

By Robin Roenker | Photos by Matt Goins

Close your eyes, and you'll see my world," said Lynn Fordham, 84, of Lexington.

It took only four hours for an eye infection to strip Fordham of his sight last summer. He remembers the date exactly: June 28, 2007, the last time he could see. Glaucoma had already rendered his left eye ineffective, and several surgeries could not restore vision to his right eye, where the infection had devastated his cornea. By August one thing was clear: Fordham would be blind the rest of his life.

Naturally, the news wasn't easy to hear, especially for Fordham, still active and intellectually curious after long, successful international careers as a research scientist and corporate executive.

With the help of his wife, Jo, Fordham began looking for ways to adjust to life without sight. When Jo Fordham happened upon an article in the *Hamburg Journal* about Central Kentucky Radio Eye (CKRE) — a radio reading service for people with visual or physical impairments — Fordham's spirits lifted.

"That was the first thing that gave me some hope and some inspiration that maybe (being blind) was going to be something that I could adjust and adapt to," said Fordham, who now depends on Radio Eye to keep up to date on local and national news as well as on business trends through publications such as the *New York Times*, *Barron's*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

"I realized CKRE could give me something to think about and add to my basic knowledge and, certainly, quality of life," Fordham said.

Meeting a Need

Central Kentucky Radio Eye began broadcasting readings of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and other regional newspapers and magazines in November 1990. Former University of Kentucky professor Al Crabb, who retired from volunteer service with CKRE just last winter, launched the agency in tribute to his fa-



Central Kentucky Radio Eye listener Lynn Fordham has a specially programmed receiver to tune into the radio reading service at his home in Lexington. Fordham lost his sight in 2007 at age 83 due to an eye infection. Fordham, an avid listener, made a major contribution to help CKRE move to a new location this summer.



Volunteer Barb McGroarty reads the *Lexington Herald-Leader* during a broadcast at the CKRE studios in the Margaret I. King Library at UK.

ther, who had benefited from a similar reading service in the Nashville, Tenn., area. CKRE was and remains the only service of its kind in the state.

Anyone with a visual or physical condition that makes reading text difficult can apply for and receive a specialized radio to pick up CKRE's transmission, which is broadcast on a low-level "sub-carrier" frequency that WUKY provides free of charge to the agency. The service is free, and radios are provided to listeners for a voluntary, one-time user fee of \$25.

Broadcasts can be picked up within roughly 50 to 70 miles of Lexington, from Owenton in the north to Berea in the south and from Bardstown in the west to Beattyville in the east. Currently, some 1,000 listeners tune in to CKRE's broadcasts via radio while an estimated 2,000 more listen in area hospitals, where broadcasts are made available, or via Lexington Public Library Cable Channel 20, which runs audio from Radio Eye's service from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. each day. Live, around-the-clock audio streaming of CKRE's service is also available on its Web site to anyone with Internet access.

Currently, Radio Eye produces local programming from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays and from 8 a.m. to noon on weekends. During other hours, the service kicks over to broadcast readings from InTouch Networks based in New York, which provides leading national publications such as the *New York Times* and popular magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.

CKRE serves an older demographic. The average age of its listeners is 70. Many are blind or visually impaired. Others are wheelchair-bound, dealing with conditions such as Parkinson's disease or muscular dystrophy. Listeners often have limited mobility and can at times feel isolated. Their radios become sources of companionship, connections to the outside world available 24 hours a day.

Readings of the *Herald-Leader* — particularly the obituaries and sports sections — are some of the service's most popular, though listeners also enjoy hearing regional news from the *Woodford Sun*, the *Mt. Sterling Advocate*, the *Richmond Register*, the *Jessamine Journal*, and other area papers, said Sarah Nix, CKRE's studio manager.

"We get an awful lot of good letters from listeners," said volunteer reader Tom Dixon, who has worked with the agency since 1996. "One lady wrote in and said that we were her angels. Obviously, that touches you."

Making a Move

Margaret Chase began volunteering with Central Kentucky Radio Eye in 1996 — after she was told her native English accent would make her a good reader — and by 2002 she had



Studio manager Sarah Nix marks stories to be covered in the daily reading of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*.

become the agency's executive director, working full-time hours without pay. She is a woman on a mission. Her ultimate goal: taking the reading service statewide.

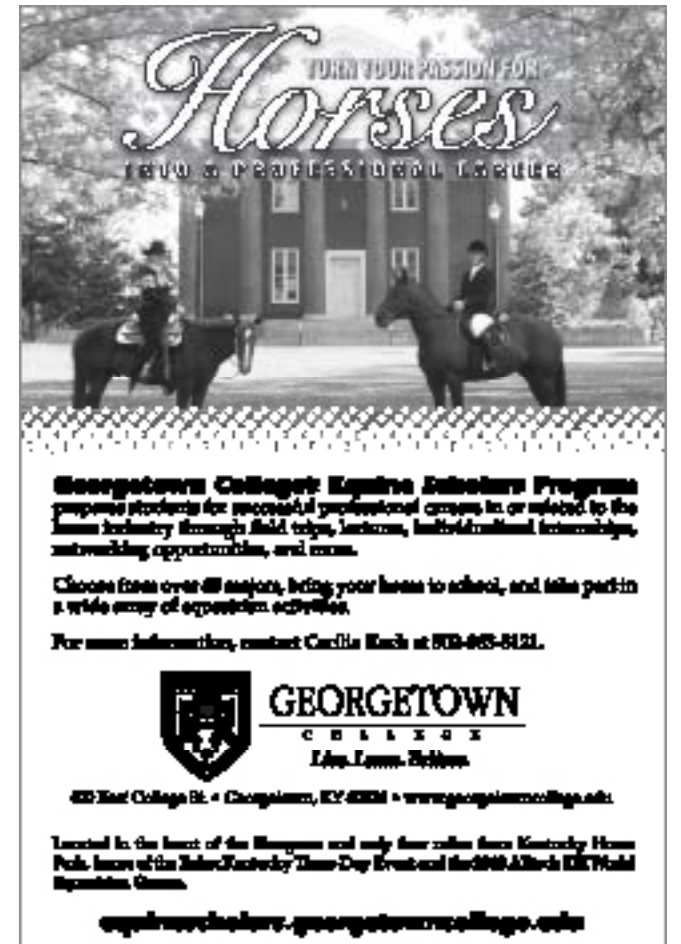
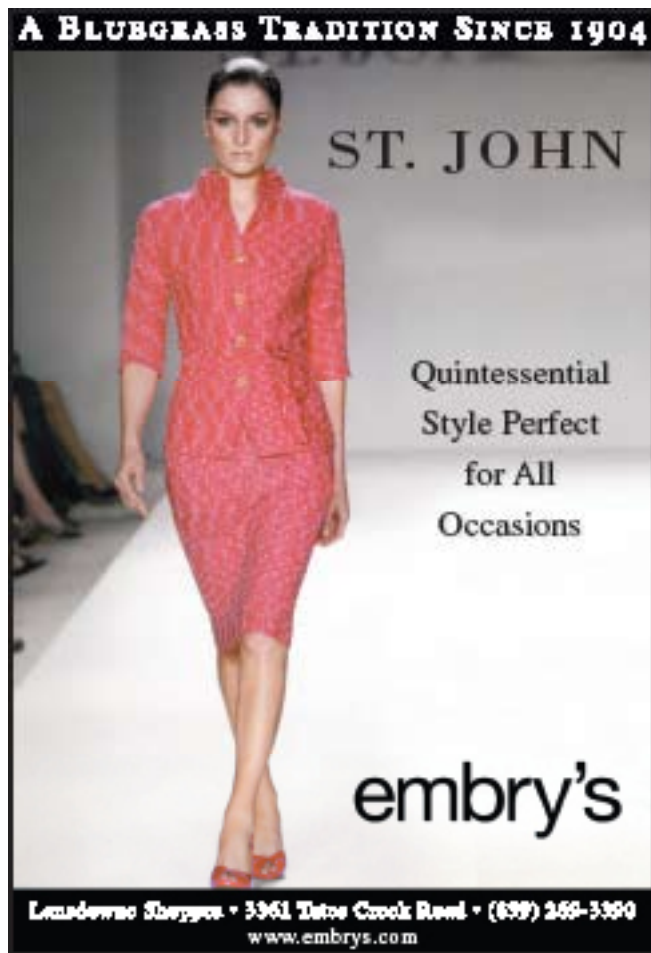
Radio Eye's upcoming move to a larger, state-of-the-art, rent-free studio space in the new Northside Library on Russell Cave Road, set to be completed in late summer, will make that a reality, she said. Already, she's approached Donovan Reynolds, general manager of Louisville Public Media, a consortium of three Louisville public radio stations, about broadcasting CKRE's service on one of its sub-carrier frequencies into the Louisville area. Reynolds said he's eager to make that happen.

"I hope we'll be able to offer that service soon here," Reynolds said.

Lexington Public Library board members "were thrilled" at the opportunity to partner with CKRE to provide the organization with a "purpose-built space" in which to work, said Kathleen Imhoff, Lexington Pub-



CKRE executive director Margaret Chase visits the service's future home in the Northside Library.



CENTRAL KENTUCKY RADIO EYE

lic Library executive director and CEO. “If Central Kentucky Radio Eye didn’t exist, the library would have to find some other way (to reach those patrons). And that is what happens in some other states: The library actually provides the (radio reading) service for people who can no longer read for themselves. We are thrilled that Central Kentucky already has a well-run, very successful project that we can collaborate with.”

Patrons to the new Northside Library



From left, volunteers Barb McGroarty, Tom Dixon, and Leif Rigney read the newspaper to listeners.

will be able to view CKRE volunteers reading on air in the studio through a large plate-glass window. The hope is that increased visibility will lead to more word-of-mouth recognition and an increased audience for the service.

“I think there’s so much potential in the partnership. If we can reach even five more people who right now are in the dark because they don’t have access to materials, it’s going to help everybody,” Imhoff said.

With the move to the new Northside Library studio, CKRE also will move to a

more advanced recording system, abandoning the mini audio disks (which look like small CDs) it uses now in favor of recording straight to computers via a more high-tech automated-play system. Most of the roughly 100 to 120 radio reading services in the country have already adopted the new technology, Chase said.

The additional space and recording capabilities at Northside will allow CKRE to increase its offerings of regional newspapers and books — often requested by

listeners — and expand its local programming hours, Chase said.

But first, Radio Eye faces the daunting task of moving from its current studio space on the third floor of UK’s Margaret I. King Library to the new public library branch. The agency is in the midst of a \$200,000 fundraising campaign to offset the cost of the move, including the purchase of new equipment and furniture. Only weeks after becoming a listener, Fordham and his wife made a substantial donation to get the campaign off the ground.

Since its founding, CKRE has broadcast from its corner of the King Library rent-free. While functional, the space and fur-

nishings are dated, “like something out of WKRP” said board member and volunteer reader Barbara McGroarty, referring to the television comedy “WKRP in Cincinnati.” In addition to the live studio room, where the *Herald-Leader* and *Courier-Journal* are read each morning, the studio has three so-called recording booths, where readings of regional papers and other programs are pre-recorded for later play. One is simply a table with a recording device roughly the size of a CD player sitting to one side of Chase’s makeshift office. When it’s in use, she stuffs her papers in a briefcase — what she calls her “traveling file cabinet” — and shuffles off to find another spot to work. The other two are stand-up cubicles, slightly larger than old-time phone booths. One of these is actually a converted meat locker.

The agency operates on a shoestring budget, funded through individual donations and grants. It has just one paid staff member, studio manager Nix, who oversees the 100 volunteer readers and control-board operators — a varied mix of retirees, young professionals, even college students — that keep the station running and broadcasting 364 days a year. Christmas is the station’s one day off.

“We are one of the Cinderellas of this business,” Chase said. “We have been able to do a lot with so little.”

Keeneland has been actively involved with Central Kentucky Radio Eye since 2004 with grants to help purchase equipment and to help with the upcoming move. “The more you learn about CKRE, the more you realize what an extraordinary program it is and what an invaluable service it offers to its listeners,” said Keeneland Foundation executive director Fran Taylor.

Expanding Services

Always, Chase has her finger on the station’s pulse. She listens nearly round the clock to Radio Eye even when away

CENTRAL KENTUCKY RADIO EYE

Web site: <http://www.uky.edu/Libraries/CKRE/>

Central Kentucky Radio Eye welcomes donations to its moving campaign. Send contributions to Central Kentucky Radio Eye, University Station Box 1030, Lexington, KY 40506. Donations are tax deductible.

Currently, Central Kentucky Radio Eye is in particular need of volunteer control-board operators and volunteers willing to perform receptionist and clerical duties at the studio. Volunteers are asked to commit to a minimum of one hour of service per week. Call (859) 257-2702 for more information.

from the studio, with radios in her car and in every room of her home and via Internet service when abroad “There is little that gets past me. I want to be absolutely certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that we’re doing the best we can possibly do. I want to provide a top-notch service to our listeners,” she said.

Under Chase’s determined care and with frugal, “Band-Aid techniques,” Radio Eye has expanded its local offerings from what had been verbatim readings of newspapers and magazines to include theme-based programming on topics interesting to listeners.

CKRE’s popular “Grocery Show” shares sale prices from area grocery store circulars. Volunteer Diane Curtis’ monthly “Disability News” broadcasts tips on everything from traveling with service animals to finding handicapped accessible church services to recent legislation to

protect the rights of those with disabilities on a national and an international level. For her “Monday Health Corner,” McGroarty reads news of the latest medical advances taken from news releases from Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the Mayo Clinic, and other leading institutions.

Even employment opportunities are covered in CKRE’s “Job Talk” show. “Many clerical positions can be modified so that many blind and visually impaired individuals can do those jobs with computer technology that either reads what’s on the screen or enlarges the text,” said CKRE board member Mar-

tha Goss, a former rehabilitation counselor with the Kentucky Office for the Blind and co-producer of “Job Talk.”

Sometimes people ask Chase why a reading service is needed when people could just turn on the TV or mainstream radio and get their news instead. In addition to telling them that some types of information — such as local obituaries and job ads — aren’t available in non-print media outlets, she also has a more philosophical answer: “I think it’s all about choice and about being integrated into the community,” she said. “Why shouldn’t someone who is blind or disabled be included?” ; 🐦



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