Learning to Navigate the World Blind

In Henrico, the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired has changed lives for decades.

This is where they come to learn the skills of blindness. Cooking. Walking safely across a city street. Navigating a website. Choosing what to wear. Finding the right restroom. Interviewing for a job. To live independently as a blind person takes acceptance, patience — and plenty of practice. “I have worked with young people who come in for training ... and all they know is that things appear and they disappear,” said Melody Roane, Director of the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired. “The glass of milk appears, and it disappears. They don’t know it comes in a carton, and that it’s in the refrigerator.” There are roughly 177,000 Virginians who are considered blind or visually impaired. Because of their condition, many have been served by others, and they don’t know how to care for themselves, Roane said. Her goal at the center in Henrico County is to teach independence. That can be a challenge, even to a target audience of adults: Many people who are legally blind choose to hide their vision loss — according to the center, they present themselves as sighted due to the negative public perception that is associated with blindness. As a result, they have never had proper training in the use of nonvisual skills.

The Virginia rehab center sits on 36 acres of state property fronting Azalea Avenue, within a stone’s throw of Henrico High School. It shares the campus with the headquarters of its parent agency, the Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, and a number of related organizations, such as the Virginia Voice reading service.

The center features a residential program that typically lasts six to nine months for adults, while a summer program focuses on teens. Resident trainees stay in the 28 dorm rooms or six on-campus independent living apartments. There might be 30 or more adult resident students enrolled at any time, and about 30 teens in the summer.

All told, the center serves more than 400 clients annually. About 180 are students — full- or part time, residential or commuter. Others enroll in specialized programs, such as diabetes education seminars and off-campus technology training, or receive health education consultations at home.

A student’s full curriculum includes courses in orientation and mobility, personal and home management, Braille and assistive technology, as well as vocational services, health and wellness instruction and other training.

Preparing trainees for the business world is a key emphasis, and part of each day is spent in the computer lab.

“Some people come here having work experience, but there are some who come here — they’re 60 years old, and they have never worked a day in their life,” Roane said. “That’s a huge challenge.”

There’s a 70 percent unemployment rate for the blind. She said that needs to be remedied because a person’s self-worth is often measured by a job or employability.

Roane has been the Virginia rehab center’s director for more than a decade. It opened in February 1972, and before then, blind or vision impaired Virginians needing specialized services had to enroll in out-of-state centers.

A number of the center’s instructors are blind or vision-impaired — some since birth, others from illness, hereditary condition or injury. Roane began losing her sight at age 8 and has been totally blind for years. She lives in Richmond’s Museum District with her husband, Mark, who also is blind.

Cynthia Brandon, a former nurse from Mechanicsville, went blind in 2014 as a result of illness. She was accepted for training at the rehab center the next year, completed her program in 2016 and now volunteers as a teaching aide in the center’s instructional kitchen. “I was not a sweetheart when I came here. I was 56. It was my turn to have fun. I had put my kids through college,” she said of her phase in life. “I didn’t want to come here at first. If I did, it meant my blindness was permanent,” and she didn’t want to accept that, Brandon said. “But it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” Despite their achievements in dealing with visual impairment, instructors and trainees understand their limitations. Obviously, they cannot drive, so Roane commutes to work via carpool. “I could take the bus,” she said, “but it would take me two hours to get here. The carpool takes 15 minutes.” Jimmy Morris, 46, often relies on the Uber or Lyft ride-hailing services from his home near Virginia Center Commons. Morris, who is from Farmville, began losing his sight when in college. He has limited vision, and after benefiting from the rehab center as trainee in 2016, he made teaching his new career. After graduate school at Louisiana Tech University, which specializes in orientation and mobility training, the popular student with an upbeat attitude was hired to teach O&M at the center starting in August 2017. “I have a new attitude toward life, and a new attitude toward myself,” Morris said. Roane said hiring him was a no-brainer. “We’re looking for people who know how to challenge our students, how to encourage them, know how to build rapport, and (who) have the skills that they’re teaching,” she said. Orientation and mobility is one of the more visible areas of instruction. That’s because it takes places on city streets — often in the area around Carytown but in other areas of the city as well. Motorists might see one or two people wearing sleepshades, either standing at intersections or making their way along a sidewalk while tapping long, white canes side to side to assess the terrain. For the public, that could be most visible clue to the existence of the rehab center. Inside the center, education is a daily facet of life — whether in Braille or preparation for GED or graduate school entrance exams. There also are discussion groups about personal and public perceptions of blindness. And employability remains at the forefront. “We have not implemented this yet, but one of the things we are working on is putting employment experience into the program for our adults so that they have a chance to work somewhere in the community, and have that (experience) when they go home,” Roane said. A summer program for teens includes three weeks of work at local businesses. “We have some huge employer champions in the community,” Roane said. “For instance, Chick-fil-A, Ellwood Thompson, Crowne Plaza downtown, the Flying Squirrels ... and there are some poolside concession stands where some of our kids will be working.” She noted that the public can schedule tours of the center, and qualified volunteers are always needed. “I want people to know we are here,” Roane said. “They might not need us now, but somewhere down the road they might need us.”

“I didn’t want to come here at first. ... But it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” Cynthia Brandon, a former nurse from Mechanicsville who went blind in 2014 as a result of illness.

Tips for Interacting with Blind People

Melody Roane, director of the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired, offers general tips for sighted people when interacting with blind individuals:

Blind and vision-impaired individuals are a cross section of society, so while one person might have a particular skill, another might not. The key to successful interaction is communication.

“Blind” is not a bad word, and individuals are often happy to explain their experiences. But they don’t dwell on it — they have many interests and enjoy discussing other topics. So while sighted people don’t have to avoid the topic of vision, they shouldn’t dwell on it, either.

Blind people are teachers, customer service representatives, physicists, carpenters, business owners, financial advisers and more. Don’t just close your eyes and determine that, because you can’t imagine doing your job without vision, then blind people couldn’t do it. They have developed alternative techniques for doing many jobs and navigating life — in fact, problem-solving is one of their top attributes.

“Amazing” is a cringe-worthy word. Taking an escalator, tying shoes, crossing the street or preparing a meal is not amazing, and low expectations are a barrier to successful integration into society and employment.

Blind individuals are in control of their own lives and make their own decisions. Blindness does not necessitate a caretaker, and a sighted companion could be a friend or someone hired to assist with errands and accessing visual information. Direct questions to the blind person — for example, don’t ask someone else if he or she can sign a credit card receipt.

Blind individuals on the street aren’t necessarily lost — they might be listening to traffic or using the sun to determine the right direction. It is OK to offer assistance, but it’s OK for a blind person to decline.

The Playground

Crossing a street? Locating a destination? Listen to this

(Picture caption: Chris Infante (left) and orientation and mobility instructor Jimmy Morris found their way to the 10 Italian Cafe in Carytown. A stretch of Carytown-area streets dubbed “the playground” is used for training blind and vision-impaired students.)

Chris Infante is on a mission. He’s standing at Auburn and Ellwood avenues, in a residential area just north of the heart of Carytown. “Your job,” he is told, “is to find a business at the northwest corner of Auburn and Cary Street.” Not so hard if you know your way around, and if you can see. But Infante is wearing sleepshades, and he must rely only on his wits and a white cane. This is “the playground,” the maze of Carytown-area streets used by students and instructors at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired to practice orientation and mobility. This is not Infante’s first time here, and it won’t be his last. By the time he finishes this O&M course — on average 300 to 340 hours of field work and instructional feedback sessions — he should have developed the skills to navigate blind in almost any city. But first he has to cross Ellwood. “Tell me about this street,” says Jimmy Morris, Infante’s instructor for the day. Anything you can tell me about any of these streets here?” “Well, I think we’re at Ellwood Avenue, and Ellwood is a one-way street with traffic running east to west,” says Infante, 26, who grew up in western Henrico County and graduated from Douglas Freeman High School. “That’s right,” Morris says. “And when is it safe to cross?” “When it’s all quiet.” “Good, good,” Morris says. “Any street this uncontrolled, you’re gonna cross when it’s totally quiet.” “Uncontrolled” means the intersection has no traffic lights or stop or yield signs to control the main flow of traffic. So Infante must use his ears. He listens ... and listens. A few cars pass, then a few more. He keeps listening. By now, Infante has been standing at the intersection for maybe three minutes. He’s a bit leery, because earlier, he inadvertently veered into the lanes on Grove Avenue. “Take your time,” Morris tells him.

“Nobody’s in a hurry.” Finally, Infante makes his move. He uses his cane to locate the curb. He and Morris, also wearing sleepshades, cross the street and then move carefully over jutting, unfriendly sidewalk panels that have been pushed up at odd angles over the years by tree roots. They arrive at Cary Street. Infante can sense traffic on one-way Cary coming to a stop about 10 to 15 yards to the west. That’s where the traffic lights are. “So, where is the business we’re looking for at the northwest corner?” Morris asks. “Somewhere behind us,” Infante answers correctly. It’s the 10 Italian Cafe. They find the entrance, figure out where the counter is — based only on voices inside — and greet the owner. A few days earlier, Morris was the

O&M instructor for Montrell Rodgers, 31, from Portsmouth. Rodgers is proficient with the white cane and navigates the sidewalks easily. Like Morris, he could envision himself as a mobility instructor. He wants to stop being a victim of his own blindness. “For six years, I had an apartment,” Rodgers said. “I just sat around listening to the TV. Now, I want to better myself, to go back to school.” Rodgers has arrived at the intersection of Dooley and Floyd avenues. The traffic sounds different here — a lot of slowing, some stopping, some turning. Rodgers listens but doesn’t attempt to cross Dooley. Too much traffic noise. After a couple of minutes, he offers an opinion: “I think it’s a roundabout.” “Good,” Morris says,” but why do you think it’s a roundabout?” “That car that was coming down the street, it sounded like he made a right turn but then came around toward me,” Rodgers said. “So, who has the right-of-way when he enters the roundabout?” Morris asks. Rodgers pauses. “Come on, Montrell, I’m trying to get you your driver’s license now,” Morris says with a chuckle. “You said you wanted the keys. If you don’t pass, you don’t get the keys.” This is the sort of good-natured back-and-forth that goes on between instructor and student, a real-time exchange of information that might save a life.

Photo caption: Montrell Rodgers (front) listens intently at a Grove Avenue intersection. “You don’t want to cross until it’s totally quiet,” instructor Jimmy Morris said of traffic.

Morris fires more questions about the dangers of crossing at a roundabout, including how a vehicle could make a U-turn and head back in your direction. A few minutes go by, and Rodgers still hasn’t crossed Dooley. Traffic has yet to literally quiet down. He hears a vehicle approach on Dooley, pause at the yield sign, accelerate, then circle the roundabout and head back in the direction it came from. Point proven. Morris throws back his head and laughs. “Hey, that usually doesn’t happen, but it did. And that’s the reason you don’t want to cross until it’s totally quiet.”

For Infante, his visit to 10 Italian Café was successful. Now it’s time to return to the rehab center’s van, which is parked on Grove. “But this time,” Morris says, “I want you to take a different route. Any route, your choice — just different.” Which he does. Now on Grove, Infante knows that the van should be parked somewhere in the next block. But it’s a long city block, and he doesn’t count on that. He ventures off the curb at midblock and uses the tip of his white cane to feel for vehicle tires. OK, there’s one, but he feels the contour of the car and decides it’s a sedan. Next vehicle, same story. Another sedan. And another. Finally, the fourth vehicle is a van. But the side door is locked, and Infante knows that the rehab center’s van driver wouldn’t have locked the side door. It must be a different van. He keeps moving. The next vehicle is another van, so Infante pulls the side-door latch, opens the door and begins to step in. But he catches a quick whiff of a chemical and backs off. Wrong again. The third van turns out to be the right one, and Infante enters for the ride home — sheepishly aware that moments earlier, he nearly hitched a ride in a Bradley Mechanical service van.

Jimmy Morris

Once mad at the world, a student finds his calling as a teacher

“I still had a lot of useful vision (in college) and truly didn’t understand how it was going to impact my life. And I really didn’t want to understand it, because I thought it made me too vulnerable.” Jimmy Morris, instructor at the center for the blind.

For years, Jimmy Morris refused to be blind. “I didn’t like showing blindness,” he said. “I didn’t want to appear weak.” To look at Morris, you don’t see weakness. The Henrico County resident is 46 and an imposing figure at 6-foot-2, 245 pounds. As an orientation and mobility instructor at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired in Henrico, he exudes confidence. It wasn’t always that way. “Life was pretty normal on the outside,” Morris said. But psychologically, because of failing vision, “I felt like a second-rate person. ... I felt helpless at times.” Morris grew up in Farmville, where he had a normal childhood. As a young teen, he delivered newspapers for the Farmville Herald. Later, in his college years, he helped run the presses and prepare the paper’s distribution. During his sophomore year in college, Morris was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary eye disease that causes difficulty seeing at night and loss of peripheral vision. “At that point, I still had a lot of useful vision and truly didn’t understand how it was going to impact my life,” he said. “And I really didn’t want to understand it, because I thought it made me too vulnerable.” After college, Morris had trouble driving at night. He didn’t discuss his vision with others, and no one raised the subject with him. He figured that if he would hide from it, the problem would go away. “But it doesn’t,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh. “It does not go away. It’s still there.” He found success as a manager at a financial services firm, and the confidence he portrayed kept his vision issues from others. As it deteriorated, “I continued to adapt, adapt, adapt” — from using assistive technology to asking for some help if needed. Morris began using a magnifying screen reader tripling the size of the type. Then it was 8x, 10x and 12x, which affected how well he could do his job. By 2015, after 17 years with the company, he realized something had to change.

The catalyst was an iPhone. Morris was still using a flip phone, and a friend showed him what could be done nonvisually with an iPhone. “He said, ‘Email John Doe, text John Doe,’ “and the iPhone performed the functions, Morris said. Days later, he bought one. Technology, he figured, might be the answer. He took a leave of absence and enrolled as a trainee at the Virginia rehab center on Oct. 12, 2015. “That’s the day life changed for me,” Morris said. To a degree, he had accepted the reality of his vision loss. But after a few months at the center, he lost something else: his job.

“My company had been without a manager for about six months now,” he said. So a decision was made to do away with his position. “Deep down inside, I knew this is what I needed to move forward with my life,” Morris said. Nevertheless, he was mad at the world. He seethed during classes the next day. He grabbed his sleepshades and white cane, and he headed along Azalea Avenue toward Chamberlayne Avenue. He had made a sloppy intersection crossing a day earlier, but on this day — even after someone bumped into him on the sidewalk — he crossed the street, turned and crossed back. “A little smile came across my face. Life was going to be OK,” Morris said. “From that point, I had to start thinking about what I wanted to do. Things kept leading me to where I’m sitting here today.”

And that’s the rehab center, where he serves as an instructor in orientation and mobility. He teaches other blind folks how to make their way not just through city streets but through life. Morris had prepped for his graduate school entrance exams with the help of Joanne Wiggins, adult basic education specialist at the center. He was accepted into an orientation and mobility specialist program at Louisiana Tech University, and he returned to the Henrico center in August 2017 to begin his new career. “I feel very privileged just to be here,” Morris said. “It gives me an opportunity to pay back what they have given me.”

Photo caption: “It gives me an opportunity to pay back what they have given me,” Jimmie Morris said of his work at the center for the blind.

Melody Roane

Center’s director uses lessons from home — and in it

Photo caption: “The thing I give my parents credit for is they expected me to do the same things my sisters did,” said Melody Roane, who began losing her vision in her youth and is now director of the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired in Henrico.

On a family vacation out West, Melody Roane’s parents noticed that she wasn’t seeing the animals as well as her younger sisters were. “They said, ‘Well, she’s probably nearsighted. We’ll take her to the doctor and get glasses as soon as we get back,’ ” Roane recalled. Back home in Miami, her father took her to the doctor — who thought she had a brain tumor. Her mom flew back from a convention in Texas, and the doctors had adjusted their diagnosis: optic neuritis, an inflammation that damages the optic nerve. That wasn’t especially good news. “What we find is that if you develop that later in life, you don’t lose all of your vision,” Roane said. “But if you develop it early in life, you usually lose all of it. “So, I was 8.” At such an early age, Roane knew what was coming: Sooner or later, she would be blind. “But the thing I give my parents credit for is they expected me to do the same things my sisters did.” And, Roane said with a laugh, “my sisters expected me to do the same things they were doing.” After her parents divorced, Roane had one night of the week when she was responsible for fixing the family meal. “One night I was making Kraft macaroni and cheese, and my dad called and said he was going to be late, and I said, ‘Oh, no problem.’ “The macaroni was boiling, and I was like, I’ll just leave it on for another 25 minutes or a half-hour. So that night we sat down, and my dad was like, ‘What did you do to this?!’ “That’s when I learned that your kids will make mistakes. That doesn’t mean to keep them out of the kitchen. It just means that they’re learning. I learned after that you can overcook macaroni — I didn’t know that before!” It’s a lesson she has remembered, and used, throughout her career as an educator of the blind. In Henrico County, Roane heads a staff of about two dozen full-timers and up to a dozen part-timers at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired, where she has been director since September 2006. She has led similar centers in New Mexico, Alaska and Michigan. Roane and her husband, Mark, who also is blind, live in the Museum District in Richmond and are active in the community. Their home is part of the lesson to her students. In summer 2017, the center’s youth program had about 30 teens enrolled. “We’d bring them over to our house in groups of 10 on Sunday evenings to have dinner with us,” Roane said, “and to talk with them about what it’s like as a blind couple living in the community, what are some of the things that we look for when you buy a house, and how do you serve 10 people when you have a dinner party. We really enjoy that.”

The learning continues for her, too. Roane played piano as a child but eventually gave it up. Recently, she resumed lessons.

What’s cooking

Dinner for 15? Making big meals is one key course in learning kitchen skills

Photo caption: Nobody goes through a full course of training at the center without learning to cook: At two hours a day, a student will commonly log 200 to 250 hours in the kitchen before graduating.

Montrell Rodgers stands tall over the cooktop. He stirs the sizzling contents of his frying pan, and the aroma of beef, green peppers, cheese and other ingredients fills the expansive kitchen. “Fajitas!” Rodgers announces. “Who wants to taste?” Rodgers, 31, from Portsmouth, has been vision-impaired since he was 4, when he lost sight in his right eye. At 17, he suffered a detached retina in his left eye, which damaged his cornea. Now, all he can see are colors and shapes. “I’m preparing myself for the worst,” he says. That’s why Rodgers and Chris Infante, a Henrico County resident making cheesecake nearby, wear sleepshades at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired, even though both have some eyesight.

Besides, in the center’s instructional kitchen, those are the rules: sleepshades. No peeking. And cooking instructor Linda Price sticks to the rules. Practice the skills of blindness, she says. Organize your kitchen. Know where things are. Put them back where they’re supposed to be. Clean up after yourself.

Price, who has excellent vision, is a veteran at teaching cooking skills to the blind. She’s been here for a decade, and before that, she worked at similar centers in New Mexico and Alaska. Nobody goes through a full course of training at the Virginia rehab center without learning to cook: It is one of the essential skills of blindness that form the backbone of the center’s curriculum. At two hours a day, a student will commonly log 200 to 250 hours in the kitchen before graduating. Price’s kitchen contains gas and electric stoves, three dishwashers and three refrigerators. There also are food preparation tables and an assortment of pantries.

Price opens one of the pantries to display its contents. A tote might be labeled “tomato products” in Braille, but if you’re blind, how do you distinguish a can of tomato paste from a can of diced tomatoes? That one’s easy: by feel. The tomato paste can is thinner. So, those two items can be kept in the same basket — along with cans of tomato sauce — and students will still know which is which. Feel also lets students identify produce, dairy products, meat packages or the shape of an olive oil bottle.

For condensed milk and evaporated milk, whose cans are the same size, a Braille label might be needed — and the same goes for seasonings. Elsewhere in the kitchen, individual cabinets might focus on mixing bowls, baking dishes or dinnerware. “Everything has its place,” Price says. “And everything has to go back in the right place.”

At the other end of the kitchen, Infante, 26, puts the final touches on his cheesecake. The process had involved locating the ingredients — eggs, sugar, flour, salt, vanilla extract, confectioner’s sugar, cream cheese, butter — measuring them and adding them in the right amounts per the recipe. All while blindfolded. Then cleaning up and returning everything to its proper area. He has done this under the watchful ear of Cynthia Brandon, a former nurse from Mechanicsville who began losing her sight in 2014 in her mid-50s after an illness. She was totally blind within months: The diagnosis was neuromyelitis optica, a central nervous system disorder that primarily affects the eye nerves and spinal cord.

Brandon was accepted for training at the rehab center in November 2015.

Having graduated from the program, she returned as a volunteer assistant in the kitchen — and is like a mother hen to the students. “She has been a blessing to me,” says Price, the cooking instructor. “I don’t want to let her go.” Brandon thinks she has found her niche: She hopes to become an instructor in the field. Infante, too, is interested in education. The graduate of Douglas Freeman High School in Henrico is studying to take the graduate school entrance exam and hopes to be a school counselor.

Meanwhile, the fajitas and cheesecake that Rodgers and Infante have concocted will be placed on the kitchen table for other students to stop by and taste.

Before they graduate, Rodgers and Infante will each have to prepare a dinner for eight, as well as a graduation dinner for 15. “After their formal meal and graduation meal,” Price says, “they’re finished in the kitchen.”

Photo caption: Chris Infante makes cheesecake with kitchen aide Cynthia Brandon at the center for the blind. Brandon, who began losing her eyesight in 2014 in her mid-50s, is a former student at the center who is now a volunteer assistant.

High-tech help

iPhones and other assistive technology enhance life at home and work

Mike Fish puts a bill on the table and places his iPhone on top of it. Within seconds, a money reader app announces: “Five dollars, five dollars, five dollars!” “I’d like the money maker application, but that’s not going to happen,” Fish jokes to one of his students.

Fish, 32, is a technology instructor at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired. The Look-Tel Money Reader app for his iPhone, and a similar currency identifier called EyeNote, are two of many computer and cellphone apps that make life easier for people who have little or no eyesight.

Fish, who has been blind since birth, cites the built-in VoiceOver screen reader as one feature that has made the iPhone so popular — and revolutionary — among blind and low-vision people.

As he explains VoiceOver’s capabilities, his phone reads a brief alert. “You just heard an alert from the (Florida) Panthers, the hockey team, because I’m a hockey fan,” says Fish, who grew up in upstate New York and skated as a youth. “Just like the notifications on your screen, (VoiceOver) can see the text, but instead of just seeing it, VoiceOver reads it to me.” With VoiceOver, a user can touch the phone screen to be told what’s there, and tapping a button will yield an audio description (double-tapping will select a function). Upgraded features can even describe images, including facial expressions, and read text within an image.

Learning to use assistive technology is essential for blind and vision- impaired people to make their way in life, much less in the business world. There are a number of GPS apps, for example, that can be installed on cellphones. “It has only been in the last two or so years where GPS technology has really become useful in navigating a sighted world nonvisually,” Fish says. He noted that some apps are dedicated to blind individuals, and with Apple’s Siri function, “you can ask for directions to a specific place and get walking turn by-turn directions, which will be spoken via Siri or VoiceOver on the iPhone.” In class, a basic skill that Fish teaches at the center is keyboarding, or learning to touch-type. “I make them wear sleepshades while keyboarding so they can’t look at the keys. The best thing is to develop muscle memory, so you can think about what you want to type instead of thinking about the keys.”

Those who can’t keyboard could rely on speech-to-text software, but that’s not practical in the business world, Fish says. “In a cubicle, if you use something like Dragon, where you’re dictating, you lose your sense of privacy.” Most keyboarding software allows a user to turn on a function that calls out each key that has been hit, though for veterans such as Fish, they might choose to have an entire text read back to them after they are finished.

Software developers have given vision-impaired people a growing number of options. “If you’re looking for what’s used primarily in employment, that would be JAWS,” Fish says. Short for Job Access With Speech, JAWS is a screen reader with a number of shortcuts to save time. For instance, a skim feature reads only the first sentence of each paragraph. JAWS also includes software that can read web pages and surf the internet. Navigating websites can be difficult for blind people, Fish says, because websites can be built in countless ways: “No webpage is created equal.”

Former students who have gone on to jobs in business, government and elsewhere say their time in technology classes was well-spent. “I hear back from a lot of them,” Fish says. “They say they can do things in their environment that they didn’t think were possible.”

Photo caption: Technology instructor Michael Fish (left) works with student Deborah Gardner at the center for the blind. From iPhone features to computer apps, assistive technology offers great promise to people with limited or no vision.