

Iowa Radio Reading Service grows with new off-air options

Audio description sparks new waves of services to reconnect clients to the world

By Elijah Decious, The Gazette When Intesar Duncan’s vision problems started to become apparent as a teenager, she couldn’t get a seat at the front of her classrooms.

The Coralville resident, who grew up in Iraq, remembers the struggle to do basic schoolwork as a teenager.

“I remember my father had to talk to the principal to get adaptations for me. I was very tall, so they wouldn’t let me sit in the front to read the blackboard,” she said. “The teacher would ask us to read aloud, and I would be struggling because of my vision.”

It was the beginning of retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic disorder that makes cells in the retina break down slowly over time, causing vision loss.

“It was very difficult — I was humiliated,” said Duncan, now 66. “I didn’t want to go to school.”

At 17, she moved to the Iowa City area with the help of her sister and brother-in-law. From Iraq, doctors told her there might be hope for treatment in Iowa. After she was seen by doctors at the University of Iowa, she learned there was no cure.

Given the way she saw the blind treated as a child, she couldn’t envision a life without her sight.

“Every time I imagined being blind, I imagined the beggars at home, standing at the mosque with a cane and a cup,” she said. “That’s the only thing I knew.”

Over the last five decades,



Iowa Radio Reading Information Service (IRIS) executive director Maryfrances Evans (center) provides audio descriptions to Intesar Duncan (right) of Coralville as she attends an Americans with Disabilities Act celebration rally with her husband Michael Baxter on Sept. 27 at the Ped Mall in Iowa City. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

IRIS/ Keeping visually impaired connected

her limited sight continued to fade until all the details were lost. Today, her vision is the worst it’s ever been.

But despite being totally blind for years, she’s been able to see more than ever. With audio description services from the Iowa Radio Reading Information Service (IRIS), she always has a front-row seat to shows,

performances and community events — even if she’s not sitting in the first row.

FROM RADIO TO LIVE, IN PERSON

Since the 1980s, Duncan has stayed connected to the news through IRIS thanks to hundreds of volunteers who read newspapers over the radio. Today, the service reaches more than 11,000 Iowans with comprehensive content from 10 daily newspapers around the state.

Early on, the organization was built on a foundation of technology’s cutting edge. Nonprofits such as IRIS popped up around the country starting in the 1970s, when it was discovered that speciallymade radios could access side channels not available to the general public on FM waves.

Subcarrier audio channels, as they were called, were initially used to play things such as music at grocery stores or in elevators.

“Someone in Minnesota had a loved one who was blind. They decided that they should try reading print material aloud for the blind on these subchannels,” said Maryfrances Evans, executive director of IRIS. “That’s how radio reading was born.”

Iowa was the fourth state to offer the service, which initially started under Iowa’s Department for the Blind. In addition to content played around the clock over the air, IRIS has expounded on its early adoption of other technologies.

In the last 5 years, their podcast network has garnered 278,000 downloads. Each year, they also gain roughly 230 new radio listeners.

In addition to specialized radios, they now send clients Amazon Echo Dots, voice-controlled virtual assistants that are easy to set up and offer more features.

“We have livestreaming, we have been putting our MP3s on the internet since 1989. We’ve been podcasting before podcasting was even a thing,” Evans said. “We simply have to be wherever technology is.”

If you can’t see, read, or understand news and in-person happenings, IRIS has a way to help.

IRIS is now 12 years into offering a new way to connect with the community in person. Audio description, one of their fastest growing services, is transmitted through receiver earpieces, where a volunteer describes what’s happening around them.

Audio description services, which started in 2012 with about five shows per year in Des Moines, has quickly blossomed. To date this year, IRIS has 38 shows scheduled at the Des Moines Civic Center, the Des Moines Playhouse, Hancher Auditorium in Iowa City, Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center in Cedar Falls and Stephens Auditorium in Ames.

The experience can be unscripted, too. IRIS takes groups to see the Iowa State Fair, describing the scenes around them as they move about the fairgrounds. Every year, they visit a haunted house with the lights on.

Other small ad hoc events are added to broaden community access, when possible. In September, Evans described speakers and performers at a celebration rally of the Americans with Disabilities Act on the Ped Mall for Duncan.

“Some things you can pick up by words, but a lot is left out (without audio description,)” Duncan said. “I enjoy events about 70 percent more with it.”

DELIVERING THE EXPERIENCE

About 400 volunteers make the services at IRIS possible across Iowa, and there’s a steady need for more.

Mary Neff, a Coralville resident who first began volunteering in 2016, is passionate about ensuring accessibility to all. For eight years, she has been reading over the radio to help people like the friends she grew up with.

“It just has always been something that was important to me, partly because I’ve been such a reader. The idea someone would not be able to have access to the universe and the beauty of reading just has always spoken to me,” Neff said. “I wanted them to experience the world.”

Sharon Falduto, who has been reading *The Gazette* every Sunday to Iowans since the 1990s, has moved into helping with audio descriptions, too.

Conveying the experience of everything from “Hairspray” to a wedding takes more than real-time talking. From funny moments to serious ones, setting the scene before the action happens is important. Through lighting and sound booth windows, Falduto keeps an eye out for the crescendo of each joke or gag.

“I need to get on top of it so that the listener can laugh with everyone else,” she said. “You also have to try to not step on what’s happening, like a song where you want the person to know there’s dancing happening.”

The enhancement also extends to partners of visually impaired clients, who are free to enjoy a show for themselves without explaining each scene.

“A volunteer did an audio description over a cellphone call and told (the client) when to stand up as her daughter walked down the aisle,” Evans gave as another example. “She didn’t have to be the last one standing up.”

A CATALYST FOR MORE

“Audio description has exploded,” Evans said. “Because of audio description, it’s broadened our view on where we can be useful.”

For visually impaired jurors, IRIS can attend court to help them fulfill their civic duty. At the Harkin Institute in Des Moines, visitors can scan a QR code to listen to volunteers describing each exhibit — a service expanding to other museums soon.

Soon, IRIS will offer braille printing for small businesses and restaurants. With clear braille overlays, visually impaired diners can read the same menus as everyone else.

With election season well underway, the nonprofit is preparing to host a fully-accessible satellite voting site in Des Moines. With a small keyboard and a pair of headphones, voters are guided through the ballot by using buttons to navigate and make their selections.

Two years ago, the voting site served 187 voters, many of whom had never voted independently before. Evans watched her friend, at age 50, vote that way for the first time.

“I know it doesn’t sound like a big deal, but start to finish, nobody had to fill out her ballot,” she said. “She got to vote in person — she didn’t have to vote absentee.”

In big ways and small, IRIS hasn’t just conveyed the world to those with limited vision — it has made them a part of the world.

“Isolation is one of the biggest side effects of vision loss,” Evans said. “Our folks understood isolation before the pandemic highlighted it for everyone else.”

THE FUTURE OF IRIS

In some ways, its growth beyond the original mission could foreshadow IRIS’ future.

With newspapers “evaporating,” Evans said securing content to read over the air is a significant challenge to contend with. As the Des Moines Register has shrunk, for example, IRIS has added content from smaller papers not covered in years past.

But some days, even those papers — strapped for resources in an industry contending with daunting trends — have little to no local news stories.

Though IRIS serves all ages, many of its radio listeners are older adults. As younger generations start to comprise a larger share of the nonprofit’s overall listeners, its executive director sees a day when most clients will prefer to listen to news and content on their own schedule. These trends would mirror those in mainstream media and entertainment, where on-demand streaming has dominated consumption across the board.

In 15 to 20 years, she predicts the vast majority of clients will be comfortable enough with technology to access the news without radio readers.

Until then, human voices will be there to deliver the personal and the impersonal: gripping headlines, heartwarming features and coupons to clip for the grocery store.

They’ll also be there to call out each client’s birthday, reminding listeners with no other links to the world that they still are part of it — and they are not forgotten.

Comments: [\(319\) 398-8340](tel:3193988340); elijah.decious@thegazette.com.



Iowa Radio Reading Information Service (IRIS) executive director Maryfrances Evans (left) helps Intesar Duncan of Coralville work the controls of an audio receiver as she attends an Americans with Disabilities Act celebration rally with her husband, Michael Baxter, on Sept. 27 at the Ped Mall in Iowa City. In addition to reading articles from newspapers from around the state, IRIS offers audio descriptions of public events and arts and cultural performances to visually impaired attendees. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)



Volunteers Mary McCarthy of Coralville and Gale Kolbet of Iowa City take turns reading articles in The Gazette for the Iowa Radio Information Service on Dec. 17, 2019, in a studio on the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City. (The Gazette)



Intesar Duncan of Coralville smiles as she listens to a description of activity of an Americans with Disabilities Act celebration rally on Sept. 27 at the Ped Mall in Iowa City. (Jim Slosiarek/ The Gazette)