**Transcript for Blind Inspirationcast Episode 34 - Spotlight on Sophie Trist and Braille Menus**

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This is Colleen Connor and you’re listening to Blind Inspirationcast.

This episode is going to be a spotlight episode on Miss Sophie Trist who is from Louisiana. I contacted her because I saw an article about brailing menus, and she became semi-famous for doing outreach in her community to braille menus at restaurants. So I sent her an email, and she said she didn’t mind writing a statement for me. We didn’t have time to get together for an interview. She’s in Louisiana and I’m near DC, so it didn’t work out. But I asked her some interview questions, and she kindly wrote back to me. So without further ado here’s Sophie’s story.

“My name is Sophie Trist, and I've lived in Louisiana my entire life. I've been blind since birth due to a rare genetic disorder called Fraser Syndrome. Because I was born totally blind, I began receiving braille instruction at the tender age of three. By the age of seven, I'd mastered the entire braille code, about the age a sighted child learns to read. People often ask me if it was hard to learn braille. My favorite response is, "Was it hard for you to learn print?" I have never known anything else; braille is second nature to me.

The summer I was sixteen, I was dating another blind guy who lived abroad. He was coming back home to America for a visit, and I was telling my dad about how we planned to go to a local restaurant for a date, just like any ordinary teenage couple. "When two blind people eat out, how do they handle the menu?" Dad asked.

This question threw me for a loop. I had never thought about that situation. Every time I'd gone to a restaurant, there had been a sighted person there to read the menu. "I guess the waiter would do it," I said awkwardly. But then I got to thinking. My goal as a blind person is to be as independent as possible. How can I expect others to see me as independent when I can't do something as simple as order from a menu by myself? That conversation with my father was my inspiration. A few days later, I sent out letters to every local restaurant I could think of, offering to braille their menus for $30.

My new business was successful and received an overwhelmingly positive response. About thirty restaurants responded. The way I brailled the menu was: The restaurant would send me the menu as a word document attached to an email. I would then use my braillenote apex to read the menu and type it using a perkins brailler. (I know there are embossers out there, but I'm not a very high tech person.) On average, it took a couple of hours to braille a menu. Some of the longer menus took a day or two.

The braille menu received a lot of press. An article was written about it in the Baton Rouge Advocate, and I was featured on News with a Twist, an educational channel played in schools. Most thrilling, I was selected to be one of six blind teenagers featured on Out of Sight: How Blind Kids See the World, on the Nick News show with Linda Ellerby. The money the business made was pretty sweet, but for me, the best part was raising awareness of blindness-related issues in my community. I hope that my braille menu business was both an inspiration to other blind people to fight for their independence and a wake-up call for the sighted population. There wasn't really a "worst part." I loved everything about the business and what I believe it stood for.

Unfortunately, I am no longer brailing menus. This past May, I graduated high school and am currently a student at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. This is a training center which gives blind adults the skills in cane travel, technology, and home management that they will need to live successful, independent lives in the real world. After six to nine months at LCB, I plan to attend Loyola University of New Orleans to double major in English and history. My eventual goal is to become a writer and go to law school.”

Quite a story and a big thank you to Sophie for being willing to be interviewed. If you have a story or would like to share anything, as always, please feel free to write in blindinspirationcast@gmail.com or tweet @inspirationscast. I’m also on Facebook: Blind Inspirationcast, and of course you can always comment on the website or iTunes.

As I’ve mentioned in previous podcasts, I am learning braille through the Hadley School. I have Cone-Rod Dystrophy, so I am partially sighted still. So I have a little bit different experience than she does. But I find these kind of problems frustrating, uh, it’s a lot of issues that sighted people don’t event think about: going to a restaurant, looking at a map, going to a public restroom. I mean there are a lot of things that sighted people just go “Oh my gosh, I didn’t even think about that.” So raising awareness of that is huge, and I think she, Sophie, took a great step and I wish her all the best. I’ll see if I can follow up with her on what she thought of the Louisiana blind school, because I’ve mentioned before the different independent centers you can go to. There are several throughout the United States. Some of them are associated with the National Federation for the Blind, others are just centers just based on the state. And you learn technology skills, cane and mobility travel, some centers set you up with service animals. You can learn braille and just cooking, cleaning, things that are going to allow you to be independent as you move forward with your life.

So I hope that you guys enjoyed this spotlight and I plan to do more of them as I communicate with more people. Thank you all so much for listening. Once again this is Colleen Connor and Blind Inspirationcast. Please feel free to write in or tweet.