

Saturday, May 26, 1990

Computer proves invaluable in woman's work with tykes

By Jeanne Peck
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For almost 20 years, Estelle Condra has been acting out stories for children around the world.

Legally blind since birth, she now uses a computer to give her drama new independence.

Before Condra's husband gave her an IBM computer with enlarger and voice synthesizer attachments, she said she had to rely on the kindness of others to read.

"I select stories and decide if they can be turned into performances. I act out all the characters in a story," the Nashvillian says. "I used to have a team of people reading stories to me on tape. But now I can do it myself."

She also had to use the time-consuming combination of a dictaphone and personal typist to transfer her ideas onto paper.

"It was error-free in the sense that I had this wonderful typist," she recalls. "But now that I've got it all in the computer, I can just go in whenever I want."

Now Condra uses the IBM Screen Reader, which enables her



Estelle Condra

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to hear the words on the screen, and a software feature called Zoomtext that enlarges the text.

"Zoomtext makes the letters about two inches big," she says. "I can prepare all my research and all my lesson plans on the computer."

Condra, a South Africa native who moved here 18 years ago, also leads in-service training in creative writing for teachers.

The \$630 Screen Reader can even read to her in the Dutch Afrikaaner dialect.

"The reader is phonetically programmed," she says. "I can type in my native language, and the computer just reads it off. It just makes me giggle to myself to hear it read to me in Afrikaaner."

The Screen Reader and Zoomtext were among products discussed by representatives of IBM's National Support Center for Persons with Disabilities in Atlanta at a seminar in Nashville this week.

The seminar focused on computer-aided devices designed to aid the handicapped. The four-year old center (1-800-426-2133, or 1-800-284-9482 for TDD) offers a database of 780 products from 600 companies.

"The center gets over 2,000

calls monthly," says Steve Raber, IBM's branch manager here. "It's not our intent to make a profit off this type of equipment. We sell all the hardware and software at cost."

The center employs about 13, several of whom are disabled, Raber says. Of IBM's 200,000 workers, about 7,000 are handicapped.

Employers can often make the workplace accessible to the handicapped with minor, inexpensive adjustments, says Jim Breene, an IBM representative. He cites a survey of what it cost 367 federal contractors to provide for the physical needs of their 20,000 handicapped workers.

"Fifty-one percent of the accommodations cost nothing," he says. "Seventy percent cost less than \$100. One man who works at the center has polio, and he couldn't get his wheelchair up to the desk.

"So we just put a couple of 2-by-4s under the legs of his desk and the problem was solved."

More sophisticated systems can run into the thousands of dollars.

Condra says she was fortunate her husband could afford to buy her the system.

"My office is all rigged out. I am so lucky," she says. "I love words; they are my business. And now I can read hundreds of them."