

Southwesterner In Focus
TEACHING VISUALLY
HANDICAPPED REWARDING

By Julie Elkins
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The miracle of love and warmth and understanding and encouragement that can create an insight sometimes more powerful than sight . . .

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A genuine Southwesterner, I ever since her pioneer grandfather brought his bride from Philadelphia in 1886 to El Paso del Norte's dusty, unimpressive streets, Mrs. Ratner laughs when she recalls her grandmother's first exclamation when she saw her future home.

“Granny said if she had known when she got off that train that she would have to spend the rest of her life here, she would never have done it! There were no paved streets, few stores or anything compared to Philadelphia. Even the first train had only been established five years before,” Mrs. Ratner related. “But she eventually came to love El Paso and became very active in social and civic affairs.”



MRS. AL RATNER

GROWS WITH TOWN

Her mother, Mrs. Max Moye, was born here, and Mrs. Ratner, then Miss Adalaide Moye, and her two brothers, Edwin and Max, grew as the town grew. She attended Vilas and Dudley schools, was graduated from El Paso High School, and began studies at the old College of Mines. Her degree in nursery-kindergarten education was awarded by Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

Returning to El Paso, she taught two years at Radford School for Girls before marrying in 1940 in what The El Paso Times' Woman's Page described as “one of the season's important weddings.”

Mrs. Ratner met her husband when he came to El Paso to work at the White House Department Store. “Someone gave a party for me and invited him. It was just one of those things,” she recalled.

The wedding took place in the family home at 1431 Hawthorne, which has sheltered four generations, counting the Ratner's three children now.

"We lived in Amarillo for a year where my husband operated two stores, and then moved to Laredo and other places in East Texas. We were glad to get back to El Paso after that and have lived here ever since," she smiled.

Her interest in teaching the visually handicapped began as something of a stop-gap occupation. "As president of the El Paso Chapter of National Council of Jewish Women, I had worked hard for two years and was looking for something to keep just as busy on," she explained.

Some years before her good friend, Mrs. Ora Potter, who had been the first teacher of the visually handicapped in El Paso, had talked about learning Braille in a class taught by

"I felt it would be fruitful and interesting, so I started learning Braille in a class taught by Mrs. I.B. Goodman. Several of us were studying at once and the Lighthouse for the Blind provided materials."

Mrs. Nathan Keller still teaches classes in Braille for people interested in learning, he added.

In 1959 Mrs. Ratner was offered a teaching job in the visually handicapped class at Houston School. "I had a teaching certificate, and had learned Braille and taken some extra training at the University of Houston, so I was offered the job of working with Mrs. Potter. The first local classes had started in 1958. Before that all blind children had to be sent to the state school," she recounted.

ONLY TWO HERE

Both Mrs. Ratner and Mrs. Potter are still teaching, while classes grow larger each year. Mrs. Ratner revealed that "there is a shortage of teachers of the visually handicapped. I don't know of another me here. Whenever one of us is absent, it is difficult to teach."

Everything has changed a great deal since she first began in the field. Braille grading has changed twice in the past eight years, she explained, due mostly to the addition of new contraction forms. There was also a new math code published this summer. "It's a process of constant learning, especially with many more teaching materials available to use," she said.

It takes about 10 minutes to Braille a page by hand, and two pages of Braille equals about one of standard print. Duplicating a book takes many hours of work; for example, a sixth grade English textbook would fill six to seven volumes of Braille, according to Mrs. Ratner.

"NCJW brailles any books we need, and if they can't finish one by the time the children are ready for it, they give it to us in installment form. Books duplicated in El Paso are sent all over the state, and we now have quite a vast library of volumes available here," she said.

This summer, working both with hand stylus and a Braille machine, Mrs. Ratner brailled teacher's charts and seatwork assignments such as are given to sighted classes in the first, second, and third grades. This was done so that blind children in the same classes would be aware of the appearance of the charts and requirements of the seat assignments.

IN HIGH SCHOOL

"Each child is an individual; after they once get started they usually work well in integrated clas-

ses with sighted students," she explained. "We've been working on getting them into high school with sighted students because they will benefit so much by it." The first blind student to begin an ordinary high school curriculum, a student of Mrs. Potter's entered Bowie High School as a freshman this fall.

Explaining the challenges of teaching the visually handicapped, Mrs. Ratner said "Braille is much more difficult than print because it has 256 contractions. Spelling is also much more confusing. The first year is usually the hardest and it sometimes takes the better part of two years to teach. When a sighted child starts to school, he is familiar with print from having seen the newspaper, the books he has read, traffic signs and other examples. But a blind child has no idea of what Braille is or what it's supposed to do. They have to be taught what they're using before they can learn how to use it."

By the third and fourth grades, students are learning touch typing on a regular machine in order to be able to communicate with a non-Braille reading person. They use Braille machines for their classwork. When they are integrated with sighted classes, Mrs. Ratner and Mrs. Potter write in print over the raised dots so the child's sighted teacher can read the assignment.

Giving a quick demonstration of Braille writing, Mrs. Ratner showed how only six dots comprise a Braille cell in which all letters of the alphabet, numbers, punctuation and 256 contractions are expressible. Skilled blind children can read silently as quickly as a sighted child by using both hands, although their method is much more difficult, she reported. There are also different codes for math, music and foreign languages.

ATTITUDE IMPORTANT

"The attitude of society in general can do a lot to help blind children and adults," she continued. "They don't want sympathy or extra help. They like to be independent. It may take a little longer to teach them, but once taught, they go on quite easily. Of course they can't do everything, but they can do many things that the ordinary child

can do. We've had children who excelled in science, in cooking, in things you wouldn't think a blind person could do well. Most of them have an excellent ear for music and play beautifully. They can do so many things if they are allowed to do so. Society tends to regard all handicapped persons with pity and that's the worst we can do for them."

For her outstanding service in teaching of the visually handicapped, Mrs. Ratner was named by Gov. John Connally to the newly-created State Commission for the Blind in 1965. She is one of four state members on the commission, which operates a vocational rehabilitation office in El Paso offering counseling, instruction in cane-walking and other areas to blind persons 15 years of age and older.

West Texas Chamber of Commerce officials honored her for her volunteer work on the commission at a dinner in August in Pampa, Tex. Her civic activities include NCJW, Thomason General Auxiliary, Temple Mt. Sinai Sisterhood, El Paso Museum of Art, Goodwill Industries and Woman's Department, Chamber of Commerce. She also holds membership in an impressive list of educational and professional organizations, including Association for Childhood Education, Trans-Pecos Teachers Association, Texas State Teachers Association, NEA, Council for Retarded Children, Council for Exceptional Children, and has been active in the TWC Auxiliary and AAUW.

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