Hadley

Learning Braille for Everyday Use

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, Hadley's braille practice leader Danette Johnson speaks with learner, Wendy Spencer Davis about her journey in learning braille. Welcome to the show, both of you.

**Danette Johnson:** Thanks, Ricky.

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** Thank you very much, Ricky.

**Ricky Enger:** It is so good to have you both. Any day where I get to talk about braille is a good day. So, I'm really excited about this one. It's the first time for both of you on the show. So, before we get into talking about your journey, Wendy, and learning braille and how that has gone for you, let's get a bit of info from each of you. Tell us about yourself. And yeah, we'll start with Danette.

**Danette Johnson:** Thanks, Ricky. It's really great to be here today, and like you, I'm always excited to talk about braille. I really love braille. As you mentioned, I'm the practice leader for the braille team and rehab team here at Hadley, and I was part of helping create and now support the new braille workshops, so it's exciting to be talking about this today.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. It's good to have you. Wendy, tell us a bit about yourself.

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** Thank you so much for receiving me, Ricky today, you and Danette. Formerly I had been a teacher for the school district of Philadelphia for 41 years, and if you had told me years ago that I would be experiencing braille in this community that I'm in now, I would probably say I don't think so. But it has literally taken me aback and I am very excited about learning braille.

**Ricky Enger:** Well, we're so happy to have you and your enthusiasm is really going to shine through as we talk about this. We wanted to invite you and Danette to speak about learning braille because it's something that I know a lot of people think about and they are hesitant for a number of reasons. Maybe they just don't feel ready to learn braille or maybe they don't see how braille might fit in with their daily lives. I think that when people share their stories about why braille is working for them and how they feel when they're learning it, that can really help people make that informed decision. Danette, I know you have some great questions for Wendy. I'm really looking forward to hearing your story, so let's jump right in.

**Danette Johnson:** Okay, great. Wendy, can you give us a little background on your vision loss journey and then ultimately what made you consider learning braille?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** Yes, it is a vision loss journey. I had the experience of getting hit with a soccer ball as a physical education teacher in the school district of Philadelphia. I had been teaching during the 1990’s and across the gymnasium, a ball came riveting and hit me directly in the face and my head hit a wall. So, that was my first experience. As time went on, I realized my vision started challenging me. I had gone to the doctor, they looked at my eyes and said, “A Mack truck must have hit you.” So, I didn't think anything of it. I just kept going to the doctor and as time went on, I experienced a lot of sight loss. I was fortunate enough to call the Commission for the Blind and Visually Challenged, and they said, “Well, it sounds like you have low vision.”

I was still teaching, and I realized I needed help, not knowing that I would not be able to see at one point or another. There was an assistant principal that came to my aide, and he said, “There are quite a few people that are visually challenged. Not to worry. I'll get you some help.” So, from the Commission, there was a woman that came in to counsel me and they were going to work with the roster office to organize my schedule and things of that nature. After teaching for 41 years, my daughter said, “Mommy, daddy's not well, you need to come out. You need to retire.” So long story short, I came out in 2016.That was just devastating for me.

In the meantime, the commission came in and started helping me understand, this is a new journey for me, you're not going to be able to see as well, but don't give up. Long story short, I was taking a class at the library in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and I had a classmate who had also worked for the school district of Philadelphia, and she said, “Well, I was sighted and now I'm not.” So, we were learning how to use the iPhone, and she said, “I do know braille, and I said, you do?” I had experienced braille and I figured I couldn't do it. I just can't do this. I gave up on it. Then she said, “Well, you have to start with a braille cell.” She took her time and explained to me what it was about the dots, and she told me about an egg carton.

That's when it hit me. I know how to cook, I know about an egg carton, but I didn't understand how it worked. Well, she told me about Hadley. I was also using the accessibility team through Apple, and there was a gentleman on there that said if I have a question, I should go to Hadley. And to my excitement, I said, “I'll be able to read.” So sure enough, I called Hadley, my daughter signed me up, and I asked for the braille classes, and they started sending me booklets, and it was a new life for me. I took all of the classes that I could. I ran through the books. I kept going back and experiencing what they felt like, and now I know letters A to Z and numbers one through, and I'm going to say zero. So that's where I was.

**Danette Johnson:** Awesome. Well, thank you for sharing that. So, you had a little experience. It sounds like you were playing with the braille cell a little bit with the egg cartons, but maybe not reading braille on paper. Is that correct, prior to Hadley?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** Correct. Right.

**Danette Johnson:** Okay. So, what made you decide to try again?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** My washing machine. I was inspired by my classmate, and she said, “Oh, you could do it. Just take your time.” By nature, I am very hyper. I love to run. I love to go. And I realized I just need to take my time; I need to do this. So, my washing machine has three compartments in it. One is for detergent, one fabric softener, and one for bleach or vinegar. So I felt compelled to take the Hadley book that they gave me, find the letters that were in conjunction with the areas on my washing machine, and when I realized I knew these letters and I can place them exactly where I need them, I don't have to ask anyone. I love to be independent, but I also realized I became interdependent, which was not very good for me. I really enjoyed doing things on my own, but I also had to remember it's okay to get help once in a while.

So, when I pulled the letters off of the back of the Hadley braille books that they sent me to learn, and I stuck them in the places where they belonged, I was excited. So, when it came to detergent, I took off the letter D and placed it by detergent. Then when it came to fabric softener, I took off the letter F and placed it. And then when it came to bleach, which I don't use bleach because I was afraid of messing up my colors, but I do have a color detector, I put the letter B there. And also realized I could use B because I use vinegar in my wash to brighten it up. So, the washing machine was the end all be all and I knew I could do this if I just take a little time. And since then, I've been going over the letters and now I'm ready to go and learn symbols. So, I'm excited.

**Danette Johnson:** Oh, that is really awesome. And I'm so glad that we tried to design this program to be very practical and to show you right away how you could use braille from the start. And it sounds like you did just that. Just by learning a few letters, you were able to start labeling things in your home. So that's really exciting to hear. If you think about that first book that you got from Hadley with just letters A, B, and C, what was your first experience with that? And at the end of that first workshop, what was your feeling?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** I was quite impressed that I could do this online, on the telephone, because everything is get up, get out, go to a class. But when I was able to sit at home and do like the students were doing, learning at home. I called up and there was the monitor that was on and said, you're going to learn letters A, B, and C. And it was a very friendly voice, which I was quite amazed at. And then when I saw that I could actually really learn from the monitor, and then if I had a question, I could just dial, and they would contact me and communicate. That was the icing on the cake. That really took me to an innovative method of wanting to learn the rest of the letters. I couldn't wait to learn everything. I was in a hurry. I just wanted to know.

So, when I got that first book and then I saw that there were extra tabs in the back that I could lift off, I didn't really know what I was going to do with it. But once I got past the letter F and I went to do my laundry and I said, oh, fabric softener, I don't use it because I didn't know where to put it. So now I know what to do with it. So, I'm excited. And I even started labeling my seasonings in the cabinet and other items in the freezer, which I thought I would never know what was there once I purchased it. So, it has been a great help for me.

**Danette Johnson:** That's great. It sounds like you're using braille right now in your everyday life, and it sounds like you were able to get started on that right from the beginning of this braille program. You've mentioned wanting to go on. How far would you like to take your braille learning?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** After being on some of the Book Nooks and the Writer's Circle groups, I have really attached myself to everything that Hadley is offering, even planting. I would like to learn how to truly write. They gave me a label maker that I'm learning how to use because they also gave me a tape with it. I would like to be able to use the tools to actually write. I want to learn how to read. So, I'm going to start with the little children's books and start feeling. That was the big thing that I realized that I am very tactile. I used to sew gowns and dresses and wedding gowns and things like that, I would always feel things.

What I realize now, being unsighted, I feel everything. I mean, I feel any dirt in a corner because people will ask me, how do you clean? How do you cook? How do you do this? I said, I just do it. If I want to feel dirt in a corner if I feel it, I can get it up. So, my house is clean, thank goodness for my tactility, as I would call it, and I'm just ready to learn more. I have some other work to do, but I'm learning each and every day through braille, and it's very, very different, but I'm not afraid of it. I would tell anyone, if you want to learn, if you want to be in control of your life, learn braille. It does make a difference.

**Danette Johnson:** Great. Wendy, you mentioned this a little bit, but at Hadley we have learning experts available to interact with you when you have questions or you want to talk about how things are going or you're just not sure about something or even in braille, if you want to go through some of it together. How have you worked with the Hadley staff during your braille journey, and what was that experience like?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** During my braille journey, I was a little anxious in the beginning, but once I got started, I loved the fact that I could go back and practice again. As they took me through the book, the monitor, and they said, well, this is what you're on now, try this. I was stumped with a few of the activities, but the good thing was I wasn't frightened because I knew I could go back and try it again. If I had a question, I could easily call the braille technicians and tell them where I was stumped. They would say, try this or try that. And once I finished, I love prizes, I love the tchotchkes. And they said, “Oh, you finished this, would you like a medicine holder?” I do have some medicine. I don't take much. But they actually sent me a braille medicine holder, and I could read Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday in that order, and boy was I excited that I got a prize in the mail from Hadley.

So, after that, something else came up, and then they said, well, would you like one of these? I was talking to Debbie Worman, and she sent me some things in the mail. And then, which helped me out a lot, they sent me the pop-up cells. And what I started doing was taking them with me and just pressing them to do the letters. And I kept reciting them with my fingers over and over again. But the most important thing that they were doing was an analysis. Like for letter S, they told me that the letter S looked like a saxophone. So, the mouthpiece was at the top, which would be number four. That's at the top of the braille cell, and I think that's a dot. And then they also told me on the left side would be number two and number three. I know what a saxophone looks like because I played clarinet in the marching band.

And they also told me about the letter R, which reminds me of an arrow. If you take an arrow and it's pointing to the right, then the W is just the opposite, facing the other way. So those were things that I loved about association, and I never thought I could learn it. And then I realized, I said, they're teaching me the way I actually learn. So that really excited me. The fact that someone was able to talk to me and say they do things by association. I said, “What a way to learn.” How beautiful.

**Danette Johnson:** So, you liked those hints that were given as part of the program?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** I loved them. They really, really helped me a lot. And I mean, I never thought I could learn like that, but it was a whole different way to learn.

**Danette Johnson:** Wendy, it sounds like you've really enjoyed the program and you're progressing through it pretty quickly. You're using all of the tools that are offered to you, and that is wonderful. What would you like to say to others who may be thinking about learning braille but are hesitant to get started?

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** For those people who are hesitant, remember first you go through the grief of the loss of your sight. Secondly, you have to decide, I can do this, but you can't give up. You get on it. You make an attempt. If you feel that you're not going to do well, don't believe yourself. Tell yourself you can do it. And once you get started, the Hadley people are there to help you and encourage you. The thing that I really love about the Hadley people, you all listen loudly. That's a phrase I used to use when I was teaching. I was also a class advisor, but I would always tell them to listen loudly. I needed to listen to my own information because now I'm at that place where I am listening loudly, and I am very happy at what I'm learning because I am taking my time. So, if there's anybody who even thinks that they would turn their nose up at braille, go for it because it opens a whole new world in learning how to be interdependent in today's life.

**Ricky Enger:** Wow, what a wonderful story. I love just so much about this, talking about the braille associations, talking about where you are using braille in your everyday life. Sometimes people approach it like, well, I need to learn braille, but I don't really know why. People are just telling me I should, and I don't know. I'm not motivated. But I think when somebody has their washing machine moment where they're like, “Hey, I could use braille for this particular thing,” then there's the motivation and you have a reason to tackle it. I so appreciate you putting this into perspective, knowing that it can feel overwhelming, but to not give up. And it's worth it.

If you are listening and you're thinking, “Hey, I really am ready to give this a shot myself.” It is free, just as with everything Hadley does. We send you the braille workbooks in the mail, and then you can access the audio to tell you what to do with those workbooks. You can do that by phone or online, and all you need to do to get started is just give us a call, 800-323-4238, and we'll do what we need to get you set up. Wendy, thank you so much for sharing your enthusiasm and your story with us. And of course, thank you Danette, for coming along with such great questions and for everything that you do every day for people who are learning braille, just like Wendy. This has been so cool. Thank you both.

**Danette Johnson:** Thank you, Ricky. It was great to talk about braille today.

**Wendy Spencer Davis:** Thank you, Danette, and thank you Ricky both for receiving me, and I do hope that those who have an opportunity to listen to this podcast, that they will receive braille with the grain of a mustard seed because there's so much to be given. So, take hold of it and go for it.

**Ricky Enger:** Thank you. Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcastathadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.