

Reading service offered to visually handicapped

by A.J. McClanahan

For the Tundra Times

Alaska's first radio reading service for the visually impaired offers something those with sight easily take for granted — reading of daily and weekly newspapers.

"Most people find that their family members are too busy," said Louise Rude, who has spearheaded the drive for the new service. "So we are asking our volunteers to read principally those things from the newspapers that are not covered by commercial (radio) stations."

The idea of the new service was born Oct. 7, 1982, at the home of Rude, who lost her sight to glaucoma 12 years ago. She started the Anchorage office of the National Federation of the Blind and has been an advocate for the visually impaired for years.

In 1982, Rude and others had a simple desire for someone to read local features from daily newspapers on a regular basis.

That idea became a reality on January 6 when the Alaska Information Radio Reading Education Service — known as AIRRES — began broadcasting four hours a day on weekdays. The service is available to anyone who asks for a special receiver that works like a radio.

On the air from 9 to 11 a.m. is the *Anchorage Daily News*. From 6 to 8 p.m. is *The Anchorage Times*. Also, the *Tundra Times* will be offered on Thursdays from 11-12 a.m.; and 5-6 p.m.

Those who are interested in obtaining a receiver may call the AIRRES office at 563-5522 or the National Federation of the Blind office at 272-0000.

Tim Dietzler, AIRRES director, says he eventually hopes to expand the service to more hours of the day and

beyond the listening area of KSKA Anchorage Public Radio. AIRRES currently reaches the general vicinity of Anchorage as far north as Talkeetna and as far south as Kenai and Soldotna.

Both Dietzler and Rude want the service to be statewide. Eventually, Dietzler expects the service to be offered on a cable channel, and rebroadcasts of taped material may be offered on some public radio stations.

Rude said AIRRES is aimed at the blind and those who do not have access to local publications because they have difficulty reading.

For Rude the need for such a service was driven home by the fact that that years ago she missed a concert by Carlos Montoya, who was performing in Anchorage.

Unable to read the newspaper, she had no idea the guitarist was even in the state.

And Rude said a key to the service is that all the reading on the air is done by people who donate their time because they care enough to help others.

"Right now we are so dependant on volunteers. They are the key to a successful service," she said.

She also said the office and studio space is donated to the service by Alaska Pacific University. The office is in Grant Hall on the campus.

"Alaska Pacific University is being very gracious to us," she said. But getting the office space and volunteers to work on the air is only part of the needs of AIRRES.

Rude said eventually she hopes it will have an annual budget of up to \$300,000, and that amount would make a variety of services possible.

The service currently is financed by private donations; AIRRES is a non-profit organization.

Both the Alaska State Troopers and

the Anchorage Police Department this year made substantial contributions to AIRRES, said Rude, through their charity football game.

"We have high goals," Rude said.

Among those goals is being able to reach not only the visually impaired but the illiterate. Rude said the Anchorage Literacy Project has expressed interest in working with AIRRES.

Figures are not available currently for exactly how many people eventually could be served statewide. But Rude estimated that the number "would run into the thousands."

"This is a new concept in Alaska. It's hard for people to understand the vast potential," she said, adding that it is limited only by the imagination.



Marvell Johnson, Program Director, Alaska Radio Reading Service reads news live to listeners who have special radio frequency. The programs are heard as far as Talkeetna and Kenai. photo by Steve Kakaruk