

NEWS

Service allows those with vision loss to listen to the newspaper

DULUTH -- When he was younger, Roy Hammerstedt didn't have much time to read anything, even the newspaper. "I never had much time for it," the lifelong Duluth- area resident said during a recent interview in the tidy apartment where he lives alone...

By **John Lundy**

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DULUTH - When he was younger, Roy Hammerstedt didn't have much time to read anything, even the newspaper.

"I never had much time for it," the lifelong Duluth- area resident said during a recent interview in the tidy apartment where he lives alone in the Hermantown Edgewood Vista assisted living building. At 98, Hammerstedt has the time now, but he no longer has the ability.

He uses a wheelchair and a walker to get around, but his health is good, Hammerstedt said. His memory is good, his mind and hearing sharp.

His eyesight is almost gone.

But at 9 each morning, Hammerstedt listens to local news, sports and obituaries from that day's Duluth News Tribune.

Known as Twin Ports Newspaper of the Air, the service operated by the Lighthouse Center for Vision Loss in West Duluth is in its 20th year, said Mary Junnila, the center's director. As Hammerstedt listens from his apartment at Edgewood Vista, two volunteers sit in a room at the Lighthouse Center, taking turns reading stories from the newspaper.

On Tuesday, the volunteer readers were Annette Jaros and Donelle

Radtke, both 67. Jaros, who lives on Park Point, has been with the program for a year, usually reading once a month. Radtke, whose home is in West Duluth, has been one of the volunteer newspaper readers for all 20 years of the program's existence. She's also the "day captain" for Tuesday, meaning she schedules the volunteers who read on that day.

She has a roster of eight volunteers for Tuesday, Radtke said, and would like to have 10. She often ends up being one of the readers three or four times a month.

Jaros and Radtke arrived well before 9 to go through the paper together, numbering the stories they'd read with a thick black marker. A statewide service broadcasts 24 hours a day, but at 9, a signal from the Lighthouse breaks in for the 300 or so Duluth-area receivers.

At as close to 10 as possible, the volunteers read the obituaries.

After that, they read from regional papers or from local publications such as Woman Today until signing off at 11.

The service is offered every day, even Sundays and holidays, said Marsha Lee, who has worked at the Lighthouse for 36 years.

Circumstances such as bad weather and technical problems have sometimes kept it off the air, she said. Sometimes, only one of the two scheduled volunteers is able to make it in.

That has happened to her at least twice, Jaros said.

"That's a real struggle, because you have to read constantly," she said.

Both Jaros and Radtke say they like human-interest stories, but they read from all sections of the paper, even describing pictures. It's more than they'd probably read at home.

"I would never read the sports page," Jaros said.

Listeners are invited to call the Lighthouse with their comments.

But in her 20 years, Radtke said she has heard from only one listener who was really critical.

"I think she said our voices weren't professional enough," she recalled.

None of the readers would hear any such complaint from Hammerstedt.

“That must be an awful job to read continuously like they do,” he said. “Some of them are very experienced at it, and so their words flow in good order.”

Hammerstedt has become a Newspaper of the Air listener within the past decade. He drove until he was 90, and stopped then only because he felt his reaction times were too slow. He and his wife, Lucille, both got to the point about six years ago where they needed aids such as Newspaper of the Air, he said. She died on Oct. 24, 2012.

Glaucoma and macular degeneration have robbed him almost entirely of his vision except a little to each side. “When I eat, I can’t see what I’m eating,” he said.

In addition to news, Hammerstedt is a fan of Talking Books, a service that allows him a choice of hundreds of titles. With his love of learning and the available resources, he remains a busy man. Up at 4:15 each morning, he gets his first blast of news from local radio station KDAL. He appreciates the way they present the news, he said.

But he particularly enjoys his daily 9 a.m. time of listening to the newspaper.

“You can relax more,” he said of the broadcast. “And it’s not loaded with advertising.”

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