JVIB

# Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness

September 2010 Volume 104 Number 9

## EARN CEUs ☑ IN THIS ISSUE

## ARTICLES



## NEWS AND FEATURES



0145-482X(201009)104:9;1-L

AFB PRESS

American Foundation for the Blind

# Mainstream Employment in Music Production for Individuals Who Are Visually Impaired: Development of a Model Training Program

*Virginia A. Jacko, Harold Cobo, Antonio Cobo, Rachelle Fleming, and J. Elton Moore*

It is widely agreed that unemployment and underemployment are major problems for adults who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision; Capella-McDonnall, 2005; Crudden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005; Leonard, 2000; Leonard & D'Allura, 2000; Loy, 2008; McDonnall & Crudden, 2009; Moore & LeJeune, 2008; Moore, Wolffe, & McDonnall, 2010; Truax, 2008). The literature is also replete with evidence that the transition from high school or college to work can be a complicated and frustrating experience for youths and adults who are visually impaired (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009). Work is an essential part of the lives of most adults, since holding a job provides the means to support oneself and one's family; to engage in a regular, predictable routine; and to experience satisfaction with work and self-esteem. Many individuals who are visually impaired have experienced successful and lucrative careers in the music industry as performing artists. However, little can be found in the literature on training programs that prepare individuals who are visually impaired for careers in the music production industry. This article summarizes a contemporary training program—the "Better Chance" music production program at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired (hereafter Miami Lighthouse), now in its fourth year—for persons who are visually impaired that was developed and implemented to enable clients with musical talent to acquire marketable skills that lead to employment and independence.

We express our appreciation to the Children's Trust and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for funding the Miami Lighthouse music inclusion program and to the Florida Division of Blind Services for supporting training for persons who are visually impaired in the use of access technology. We also extend our appreciation to our former client Henry Stone, who was instrumental in launching the program and for whom our music production studio, the Henry and Inez Stone Music and Sound Studio, is named, and to Miami Lighthouse donors Mary Spencer, Anne Helliwell, and Arthur Hertz.

## Origin of the Program

The lead author, inspired by her own experience at Miami Lighthouse as a newly blind person who recaptured her executive skills and regained the ability to perform at a high level, wanted to do something about the dismal employment prospects that persons who are visually impaired face in the Miami area. Music, long a career path open to persons who are visually impaired, now offers many more work opportunities for people who are visually impaired than it has in the past because the occupational "playing field" has been leveled by digital technology and screen-reading software that are designed to interface with music industry–standard software. A person who is visually impaired who has the proper training can be a sound engineer, for example, just as well as can a sighted person.

A gift from philanthropist Gloria Martin enabled the construction of a state-of-the-art production studio at Miami Lighthouse with a wide array of hardware and software; it was subsequently named in honor of Martin's friend, Henry Stone, producer of 23 gold and platinum records and a former client of Miami Lighthouse. Inaugurated on May 30, 2007, the Henry and Inez Stone Music and Sound Production Studio at Miami Lighthouse features a full array of music production hardware and software and a recording booth.

Music instruction is historically linked with instruction of individuals who are visually impaired, as the many success stories of blind musicians attest. The initial goal of the music program was simply to cultivate potential

 

musical talent in clients who are visually impaired. It quickly became apparent that the participants who are visually impaired could not only learn to use the Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) technology with screen-reading software, but could also become just as proficient as sighted persons in using the technology for music production and sound engineering. This is an important development because learning to use MIDI helped clients, especially younger individuals, to cultivate marketable skills.

In 2008, the program was strong enough that, through the expertise of professional instructors and the talent of the participants and with assistance from the Children's Trust of Miami-Dade County, Miami Lighthouse produced its first CD entirely in-house. It featured a title song, "A Better Chance," which was written by an instructor. The song became an unofficial anthem of the Miami Lighthouse.

A Children's Trust grant led to a rewarding development: the inclusion of sighted teenagers in music instruction and performance at the Miami Lighthouse. Music students who are visually impaired and sighted students from local high schools have worked together for four years: writing, performing, and producing music in a wide range of styles. In addition to the 18 graduates who were clients of Miami Lighthouse, 3 sighted students have also completed the program. In addition to providing a valuable experience for students who are visually impaired and sighted, inclusion has necessitated compliance with the Children's Trust grant, and outcome measures include self-efficacy and positive peer relationships. The music program now includes a comprehensive checklist of skills so that progress can be accurately measured and monitored through pre- and postparticipation surveys.

Providing training in marketable skills, which lead to mainstream employment, is rewarding for both the participants and the community. The 18 students who have graduated the music production program thus far are legally blind, range in age from 20 to 63, and represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In terms of gender, 80% of the graduates are male, and the remaining 20% are female. Three sighted students who were included in the program have also graduated. Of the graduates who are visually impaired, 9 now have their own music production studios and are arranging and composing albums of their own or for others, 6 have jobs in the mainstream music business, and 3 are attending college with career goals related to music. Graduates have been employed as sound engineers, radio spot producers, session musicians, professional performers, and MIDI instructors. The Miami Lighthouse music instructors have strong musical credentials as well as music industry contacts, and these contacts have proved valuable to the participants. Work in the mainstream music industry is creatively fulfilling, a fact that many of our graduates have expressed.

## Technology

MIDI is the standard software used by the music industry. Using MIDI technology, a sound engineer can change the key of a composition, alter the tempo, and switch out loops (several bars of music cut so they can be repeated indefinitely). MIDI technology enables the mixing and mastering of multiple tracks from different instruments, both electronic and recorded live, for the creation of a finished musical product.

Another music industry–standard technology is Pro Tools, a digital audio workstation used to record and edit audio tracks. It is accessed by persons who are visually impaired using ZoomText, which enlarges the information displayed on the monitor. So students can learn their skills in a technological environment like the one they would find in mainstream employment settings, the Miami Lighthouse music program familiarizes students with other audio industry technologies: Cakewalk's SONAR (a digital audio workstation), Steinberg Cubase (for music recording,

 

arranging and editing), FL Studio (formerly known as FruityLoops; a digital audio workstation), and Reason (which emulates a rack of hardware synthesizers, samplers, signal processors, sequencers, and mixers).

## Design of the Curriculum

The music instructors developed an original curriculum outlining what students are expected to learn in the music production program. Instruction begins with how to navigate the various audio software programs and moves on to how to handle hardware and cables, apply and edit audio effects, transpose MIDI tracks, and burn files to CDs. By the end of the 18th week of the curriculum, each student will have completed at least one music track on a CD.

Miami Lighthouse recently formed a collaborative relationship with the Frost School of Music, University of Miami. Students and faculty of the Frost School have been assisting the staff members of the Miami Lighthouse to further refine the curriculum and establish best program practices.

To be eligible for the 4- to 12-month adult program and the year-round student inclusion program, prospective students need to be able to use a standard computer, with mastery of the keyboard, and be familiar with JAWS screen-reading software to interface with other software. It goes without saying that musical ability and the inclination and desire to cultivate it are essential qualities of successful students.

## Successes and Performances

The inclusion program has expanded beyond including sighted high school students to including sighted adult peers paired with adult clients. Shelley Berg, dean of the Frost School, praised the program, calling it: "a national model for work-readiness skills utilizing music appreciation, exploration, and instruction" (personal communication, March 25, 2009). Brian Charlson, vice president and national technology instructor at Boston's Carroll Center for the Blind, said, "I have seen nothing like it anywhere in the United States. . . . Students appear to be fully engaged in the learning process with the clear understanding that this will lead to future employment" (personal communication, March 26, 2009).

In addition to work experience, the participants have performed live at venues all over Florida, and many more concerts are planned. These events have been well received; they have raised the profile of the Miami Lighthouse music program and have provided the participants with valuable experience in live performances.

We strongly believe that the music production training program described here can serve as a model that could be replicated at other training centers. Graduates of the Miami Lighthouse program have experienced significant successes in obtaining gainful employment in the music production industry. Given the potential for self-employment opportunities under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, the state-federal vocational rehabilitation service delivery system should consider vocational training programs in the music production arena for its clientele.

## References


Capella-McDonnall, M. E. (2005). Predictors of competitive employment for blind and visually impaired consumers of vocational rehabilitation services. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 99,* 303–315.

Crudden, A., Sansing, W., & Butler, S. (2005). Overcoming barriers to employment: Strategies of rehabilitation providers. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 99,* 325–335.

Leonard, R. (2000). Vision impairment in working-age adults. In B. Silverstone, M. A. Lang, B. Rosenthal, & E. E. Faye (Eds.), *The Lighthouse handbook on vision impairment and vision rehabilitation* (Vol. 2, pp. 1201–1218). New York: Oxford University Press.

Leonard, R., & D'Allura, T. (2000). Employment among persons with a vision impairment: A comparison of working and non-working respondents. In C. Stuen, A.

Arditi, A. Horowitz, M. A. Lang, B. Rosenthal, & K. Seidman (Eds.), *Vision rehabilitation: assessment, intervention and outcomes* (pp. 709–713). Lisse, the Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger.

Loy, B. (2008). *Accommodation and compliance series: Employees with vision impairments*. Morgantown, WV: Job Accommodation Network. Retrieved from http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/sight.html

McDonnall, M. C., & Crudden, A. (2009). Factors affecting the successful employment of transition-age youths with visual impairments. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 103,* 329–341.

Moore, J. E., & LeJeune, B. J. (2008). Low vision. In J. H. Stone & M. Blouin (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Rehabilitation*. Retrieved from http://cirrie.buffalo.edu/encyclopedia/article.php?id=17&language=en

Moore, J. E., Wolffe, K. E., & McDonnall, M. C. (2010). Employment considerations for adults with low vision. In A. Corn & J. Erin (Eds.), *Foundations of low vision: Clinical and functional perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 799–832). New York: AFB Press.

Truax, S. (2008). CareerConnect as a tool in the job placement process. *AER Journal—Research and Practice in Visual Impairment and Blindness, 1,* 92–94.

---

***Virginia A. Jacko, M.S.,*** *executive director, Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, 601 SW 8th Avenue, Miami, FL 33130; e-mail: <VJacko@miamilighthouse.org>.* ***Harold Cobo,*** *certified MIDI and recording engineer, MIDI instructor/sound engineer, Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired; e-mail: <HCobo@miamilighthouse.org>.* ***Antonio Cobo, B.M.,*** *MIDI instructor/sound engineer, Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired; e-mail: <ACobo@miamilighthouse.org>.* ***Rachelle Fleming, M.A.,*** *doctoral student, Frost School of Music, University of Miami, P.O. Box 248165, Coral Gables, FL 33124. e-mail: <RFleming@miami.edu>;* ***J. Elton Moore, Ed.D.,*** *associate dean for research and assessment, College of Education, Mississippi State University, P.O. Box 9710, Mississippi State, MS 39762; e-mail: <jemoore@colled.msstate.edu>.*