



The Caption
Center

TV for the
hearing-impaired

WGBH-Boston

Producers of
The Captioned
ABC News

decision was the outcome of a lawsuit filed by Frances Davis, a 46-year-old woman who suffered a severe hearing impairment. Davis had sought admission to a nursing college in North Carolina but was rejected because of her hearing impairment. She filed a suit based on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which requires institutions that receive federal aid to eliminate barriers that impede the admission of handicapped students. Davis argued the college was discriminating against her by refusing to admit her. The Supreme Court disagreed. In reversing a lower court's ruling, the Supreme Court stated that the law does not force schools to "accept handicapped persons who are not able to meet essential physical requirements." Many handicapped individuals, and those who work with disabled Americans, saw the ruling as a blow to equal opportunities.

There remained, of course, other negative aspects surrounding deafness, some of which seemed incred-

For one deaf man, captioned television arrived too late.

ible, considering the fact it was the 1970s, and it was assumed that there was a much more enlightened public. Some examples:

The term, "deaf-mute" continued to crop up in the press occasionally.

A deaf youngster in Chicago was shot and killed when he did not heed a landlord's command to stop. The youth and a friend had been surprised in a vacant apartment, had climbed out a window, and were on the run when he was shot.

In Los Angeles, a deaf couple, neither of whom could talk, lost their four-year-old daughter to a foster home by court order. At the first hearing the couple had no lawyer and did not know or understand what was going on. After the second hearing, the judge ordered the removal of the child to a foster home. A year later the couple learned through the grapevine about the Southern California Center for the Law and the Deaf and appealed for legal assistance. Their attorney, Allen King, blamed the court decision on the fact that they were deaf and could not provide "verbal stimulation" for their child. He also charged that the couple had been denied due process of law. Almost two years later a Superior Court judge ordered the child returned to her parents and directed the Public Social Services to work with the parents in meeting their daughter's speech needs.

Television and the Deaf Viewer

The development of television in mid-century largely brought disappointment to most deaf viewers. While sports events and "action" films (those programs with plenty of action and minimal dialogue) were popular with deaf people, most television programs were just another form of the "talkies" and were meaningless to anyone who could not understand the dialogue. Even the most skilled lipreaders could catch only scattered bits of information when a speaker's lips happened to be clearly visible on the screen.

The first efforts to make television understandable to deaf viewers were confined to interpreting programs into sign language. Interpreters were included in some news broadcasts and special programs from time to time.



Paul Butler/Gallaudet Today

In the late 1960s Malcolm J. Norwood began exploring the possibility of captioning television programs. Norwood was the deaf chief of the Media Services and Captioned Films Division of the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped (BEH), Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. He saw television as the most promising of all media for deaf people.

A survey was undertaken to see if hearing television viewers would be receptive to captions. This study found that ten per cent of the viewers in the sample population studied flatly rejected captioning. That amounted to about 20 million Americans which was more than the total number of hearing impaired Americans. The fact that a much larger segment of the population was receptive to captioning did not matter; it was obvious that open captioning would have a lengthy and tough fight to win acceptance and commercial networks would not want to take the risk. So,

Norwood decided to explore other alternatives; the outcome resulted in closed captioning.

In October 1971, BEH contracted with the WGBH Educational Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts, to produce a demonstration captioned television program for use by the Public Broadcasting Service. The following December, Norwood's office sponsored a national conference on television and the hearing impaired at the Southern Regional Media Center for the Deaf at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. The National Bureau of Standards had developed a special broadcast device to transmit time signals on television for scientific purposes, called the NBS Time System. Broadcasters realized that this device could also be used to send captioned information and that the captions would be seen only by those viewers whose television sets were equipped with a decoder. At the Tennessee conference participants were shown a captioned version of *Mod Squad*, using the NBS system,

This Sears TeleCaption television set sold for about \$520 when it first appeared on the market.



Sears, Roebuck & Co.

broadcast by ABC-TV from its New York City studios. A second and similar demonstration followed at Gallaudet College some months later.

In 1973 the Public Broadcasting Service was given a contract by DHEW to do surveys, conduct research, and develop captioning technology. Gallaudet was sub-contracted by PBS to conduct a survey of hearing impaired persons in 12 cities and evaluate their attitude toward closed captions. The results of this report were later submitted by PBS as part of its petition to the Federal Communications Commission for the use of Line 21 for closed captions. (Line 21 is a portion of the lower television screen not normally used.)

In 1975 the Federal Communications Commission adopted a ruling to require television networks to provide visual captioning to warn hearing impaired persons in emergencies.

Through the efforts of the National Center for Law and the Deaf and Dr. Donald V. Torr, now assistant vice president for College Educational Resources at Gallaudet, changes were made in the copyright law to permit educational institutions for the hearing impaired to copy programs off-the-air for the purpose of captioning and rebroadcasting them over an institution's closed circuit television network.

The Caption Center at WGBH-TV

Meanwhile, the experiments at WGBH-TV were going very well. Out of their efforts, came the original open captioned version of the "French Chef" program broadcast over the Public Broadcasting Service in August and September 1972. But, once again, a need was identified in the deaf community for more access to public affairs and news programming. The challenge of producing a news program with captions is the time, effort, and equipment required to rebroadcast a news show in time for it still to be newsworthy. It had never been attempted before, but WGBH-TV decided to give it a try. WGBH-TV developed a system that enabled it, on December 3, 1973, to broadcast the first and only news program with open captions for hearing impaired audiences. This success led to the establishment of The Caption Center at WGBH-TV.

Each weekday evening, Caption Center staff members produce *The Captioned ABC News* program which WGBH then broadcasts at 11:00 p.m. Other PBS stations around the country pick up and air the program through the PBS network. To produce this program the staff, which includes deaf individuals, work under a pressing deadline. They tape the 6:30 p.m. ABC News, cut, rewrite, and edit the script to a sixth-grade

Deafness per se does not prevent a person from accomplishing what he sets out to do—if he really wants to do it.

—DR. ROBERT G. SANDERSON

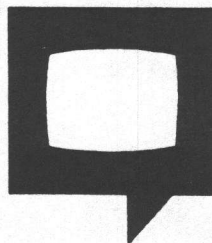
reading level, and to fit space limitations, time and insert the captions to fit the video portion of the program, ready for rebroadcast four and a half hours later. The staff also must add other material to replace the commercials shown during the regular program, since PBS is a public station and does not carry advertising. To fill these gaps WGBH includes sports results, weather reports, late-breaking news events, consumer reports, a chronicle of news related to deaf persons, and deaf heritage material.

The Caption Center has also produced such specials as captioning Richard M. Nixon's 21-minute second inaugural address, a weekly *Captioned ZOOM* program, an hour-long Miss Deaf America Pageant, and eight nightly reports on the XIII World Games for the Deaf played in Rumania. When the captions first appeared, a delighted viewer wrote WGBH-TV: "When I saw those captions it made me so happy I started yelling around the house 'Look. They gave me words!'"

By 1980 *The Captioned ABC News* was being broadcast over 142 public television stations. With continuing support from the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped and a recent grant from International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), *The Captioned ABC News* has been broadcast nationally on PBS since 1973.

National Captioning Institute

In 1976 the Federal Communications Commission agreed to reserve Line 21 on the television screen for the transmission of captions. That same year an independent, non-profit organization, the National Captioning Institute, was established with seed money from DHEW to caption regular and special television programs for showing through the closed captioning system. To launch this program, DHEW agreed to provide \$3.5 million for the first year; \$2.1



This NCI logo identifies television programs which have been captioned for deaf audiences.



D.E.A.F. Media, Inc.

Freda Norman, the Supersign Woman.

million the second year; \$900,000 the third year; and \$400,000 the fourth year. It was hoped that, after that, the Institute would become self-supporting.

Sears, Roebuck & Co. agreed to accept the responsibility for manufacturing and selling a captioning decoder at the lowest possible cost to deaf people.

Three major broadcasting systems—PBS, ABC, NBC—expressed intent to buy up to a total of 20 hours of captioned programs a week, most of it to be shown during prime time. One major network, CBS, decided not to participate in the new captioning program, choosing instead to cast its lot with a system called Teletext, which is still in the development stages in this country.

At 11 a.m. on March 23, 1979 DHEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr. made this announcement: "Today we celebrate a breakthrough for millions of

deaf and hearing-impaired Americans. I can announce today that we have completed long and complicated preparations which, by early 1980, should make it possible for the nation's deaf and hearing-impaired people to enjoy television through a system called closed captioning."

Closed captioning on television had arrived!

Television captioning arrived too late for one deaf man, however. Tired of waiting some 30 years for programs he could understand, a deaf Idahoan took his ax one day and smashed his television set to smithereens.

Other Developments in Television

An increasing number of stations began adding deaf actors or captions or sign language interpreters to some of their programs. *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, *ZOOM*, *Making Things Work*, *Nova*, *Watch Your Child!*/*The Me Too Show* were some of the programs which attempted to overcome the communications' barrier of deaf audiences.

Eventually, a few deaf newscasters broke into the highly-competitive field of news reporting and were given a few minutes on local television programs to present the news for the benefit of members of the deaf community. Following the lead of John Tubergen (see the 1950s), Jane Wilk and Peter Wechsberg teamed up and pioneered a live news program called NEWSIGN 4 in 1972. Their program was shown mornings over KRON-TV, Channel 4, in San Francisco. Cynthia Saltzman began appearing on WTOP-TV, Channel 9, in Washington, D.C. She had been recruited to report on severe weather conditions when a storm hit the area. The station received so much favorable response to the signed broadcast that Saltzman was retained to sign a regular five-minute news program every weekday morning.

A station in Portland, Oregon, recruited Henry Stack to present a five-minute news program over KGW-TV during a local break in the *Today Show*. Tim Medina had a popular "Total Communication News" program shown at lunch time on Channel 5, WTTG-TV, in Washington, D.C. Medina not only spoke and signed for himself, but visuals in the background and some captions on the screen made his program about as total as a news program could get. Gregg Brooks appeared regularly on a news program at Theta Cable

There is room in the world for deaf heroines aspiring to the heights.

—EDNA P. ADLER
