

Big Town Big Dreams

STORIES ABOUT IMMIGRANT NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE THIS TOWN THE GREAT PLACE IT IS

'To stay young, you have to stay connected'

By HEATHER ROBINSON

To stay young, you have to stay connected," says Dora Issacharoff. Discussing her work coordinating a Spanish-language program for JBI International, a New York-based nonprofit providing the blind with access to literature, Issacharoff's enthusiasm is infectious.

Svelte, chic and pretty at 76, Issacharoff immigrated to New York from her native Argentina with her husband, psychiatrist Amnon Issacharoff, when she was 25.

A life-long lover of literature and ideas, she taught Spanish language and literature for many years at Hunter College and Stern College for Women in Manhattan before retiring about two years ago.

That is when she began her career as a volunteer.

"I am at an age when . . . it was not [the priority] anymore to make a living. I wanted to give back to society something," she says.

Founded in 1931 as the Jewish Braille Institute of America, JBI specializes in making Jewish literature and prayer books available on tape, in Braille and in large print. It also makes the work of non-Jewish writers accessible to blind people.

The organization serves 35,000 people in the U.S., Israel, the former Soviet Union, Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, Western Europe and all English-speaking countries.

Because the Library of Congress — which maintains the world's largest collection of reading material for the blind — provides four-track tape machines without charge to Americans, JBI records books on tape for clients in the U.S.

But for listeners in other countries,

the organization provides books on CD, digital recording or online.

Within the next couple of years, the Library of Congress is planning to introduce digital equipment that will hold "entire books on a credit card-sized piece of plastic," according to Lisa Ann Kirsch, manager of audio production for JBI. To use this new technology, JBI will transition entirely to digital recording.

In addition to providing free reading materials to the blind, the organization maintains a clinic for blind children in Tel Aviv.

The Spanish-language program, launched two years ago, was Issacharoff's brainchild.

She began her volunteer work as a "director," or someone who calls readers' attention to any mistakes they might make when recording a book. Readers are chosen for the pitch, timbre and expressiveness of their voices.

Issacharoff says with a smile that she "didn't have it," so she decided to help in other ways.

The organization's high-tech recording studio has six soundproof booths. Readers sit inside and directors sit outside, listening for any mistakes and giving feedback to the reader on pronunciation, pacing and other elements of reading.

Issacharoff's idea for the Spanish-language program emerged from her desire to bridge people's isolation.

"Imagine to be in contact with the world — a lawyer, a nurse, a teacher, a cook or whatever, and you can't interact with the world in the same way," she says. "But you can interact with literature, with history, with your religious tradition."

Her own experience with temporarily diminished vision played a role.

"Two or three years ago I had cata-



Dora Issacharoff helps the blind have access to literature at JBI International. Photo by Mayita Mendez

ract surgery in one eye, and then the other," she says. "I realized how important it is to have your eyes, how important it is to help people who are deprived of that or who have diminished eyesight."

So far, more than a dozen Spanish books have been recorded, with an equal number in the process of being recorded.

Issacharoff also coordinates the Spanish-speaking volunteers, who include doctors, lawyers, professional voice-over actors, retired schoolteachers, waiters and soap opera actors.

She has drawn on her knowledge of literature to select the books, which include biography, fiction, self-help and psychology.

One title, "Más Allá del 11 de Sep-

tiembre," by Dr. Luis Rojas Marcos, is a first-person account of the 9/11 attacks written by a Spanish psychiatrist who was a witness and a friend of several firefighters. Rojas Marcos came in to record the book in the studio.

Other titles include "Más Historias de la Corte de Mi Padre," or "In My Father's Court," by Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer. Translated from Yiddish into Spanish, it is a book of stories the author — son of a rabbinic judge — remembered from childhood.

Issacharoff is in the process of launching an audio magazine for beneficiaries of JBI's Spanish-language program.

Clients rave about the access to books

and prayer provided by Issacharoff and other volunteers and employees.

"This was the first year I couldn't go for my Jewish holidays," says Rose Zahler, 85, of Riverhead, L.I., who is almost completely blind.

"I called up the girl at [JBI] and they sent me tapes. All day on Yom Kippur, I played that tape and felt like I was in the greatest synagogue in the world. That was the way I spent my holidays, with such joy.

"If I had to pay for this, I'd never be in the position to have it."

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Big Town Big Dreams ends today. A new series, Big Town Big Picture, starts in February.