



New Yorker

Judy Tenney

is fighting for the rights of disabled people everywhere.

As the clock struck 9:30 A.M. on a Wednesday in May, Judy Tenney started her 80th birthday celebration by ringing the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange—and ended it at the Harmonie Club in Manhattan, where she was honored by JBI International (formerly the Jewish Braille Institute).

Tall, slim, and attractive, the energetic Tenney is passionate about her work as chairman of JBI; this position is the culmination of a lifetime of volunteering for the Smith College graduate who decided in her senior year to pursue a career in teaching.

Tenney has guided the expansion of the 78-year-old JBI, now a truly international organization, during the past four years. JBI serves not only the blind, for whom the circulation of Braille and audio talking books has increased exponentially, but also many people with low vision or aging eyes for whom JBI produces large print as well.

“The Baby Boomers, numbering 78 million, are beginning to need our audio and large print books now,” Tenney says, sitting in the newly renovated volunteer

Book Smart

By Nancy Kleinbaum

Photos courtesy of Judy Tenney

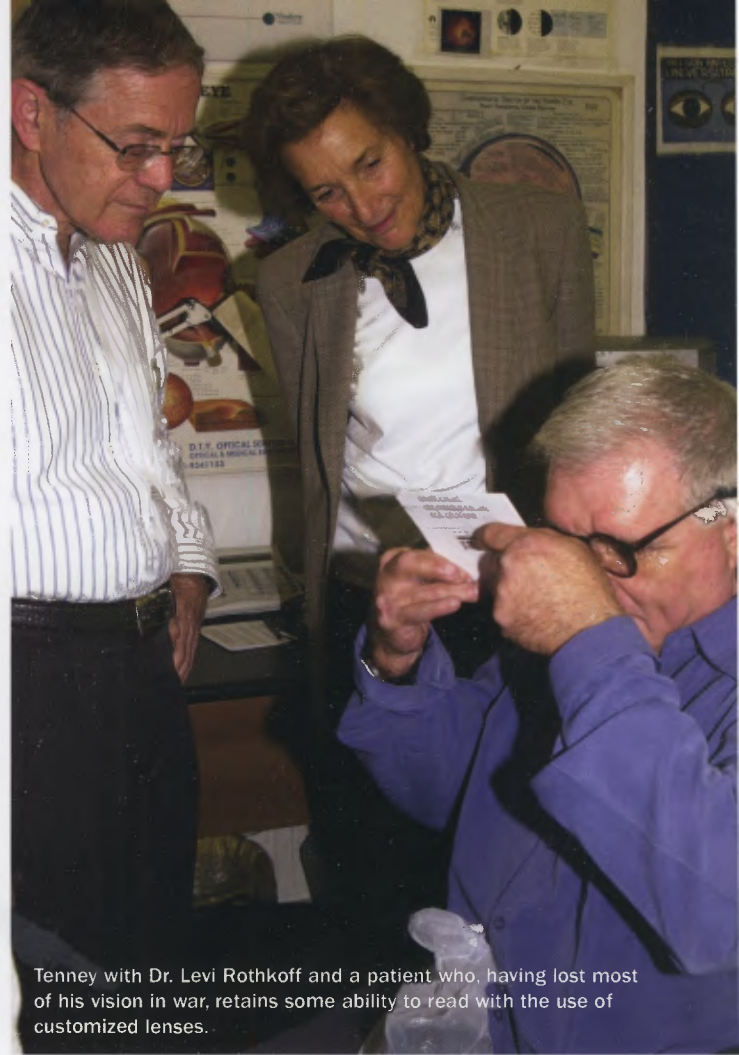
lounge of the JBI recording studios at 110 E. 30th Street in Manhattan. “Twenty percent of people over age 65 have age-related vision loss,” she says. “According to a 2002 report from the National Eye Institute, the blind and visually impaired population will double in size as the Baby Boom generation ages.”

The renovation, which began in 2007, of what had been a 100-year-old double brownstone building in Murray Hill, is also the product of Tenney’s leadership. The renovation includes the creation of six state-of-the-art sound studios so that more people can volunteer to record more books and magazines. Each year 160 JBI volunteers devote thousands of hours to the narrating and directing of talking books in eight languages—English, Russian, Yiddish, Hungarian, Romanian, Hebrew, Polish and, most recently, Spanish. JBI also has a program called Writers Who Read, through which authors such as Cynthia Ozick, Joseph Telushkin, Anne Roiphe and Dr. Oliver Sacks record their own works for the JBI library.

Since taking the reins of JBI, Tenney has also expanded the scope of the JBI Talking Book Clubs, which bring together blind and visually impaired older adults for discussions. JBI offers the largest collection of Jewish interest books in the world for the blind and visually impaired, she points out, noting that over 95 percent of the books in its collection are unavailable from any other source in the same format.

“WE PRODUCE ANY BOOK OF JEWISH INTEREST IN Braille, audio or large print in response to a special request from a JBI client anywhere in the world, and all our services are free of charge,” she explains. “Almost all the Braille is customized for individual needs. For instance, we recently helped a boy in Westchester prepare for his bar mitzvah by providing a Braille copy of his Torah and Haftorah reading, as well as the blessings. Another young man in Kansas was planning to attend a Jewish summer camp and needed a Braille songbook so that he could join in the singing around the campfire. These, like every request that we receive, were time consuming to produce—but that is why we are here and that is what we do.” In certain cases, JBI even provides a combination of audio and large print texts for children with learning disabilities.

SHE SAYS HER COMMITMENT IS IN PART THE RESULT of the frustration she saw in her own mother who, as she aged, was unable to read the *New York Times* or the books



Tenney with Dr. Levi Rothkoff and a patient who, having lost most of his vision in war, retains some ability to read with the use of customized lenses.

that she loved. She was a voracious reader, which made it particularly sad when she became frustrated and depressed because she could no longer read. “How I wish we had known about JBI and its wonderful services back then!”

“One of the immediate goals of JBI is to create greater awareness among Jewish, as well as non-Jewish, individuals and organizations about what we have to offer,” Tenney says.

She points out “that people look to JBI for books of various kinds. Our growing collection includes everything from cookbooks to fiction to history to psychology to memoirs to mysteries and more, and it is used by blind and visually impaired general readers, as well as scholars and students of Judaica. Often blind students of theology, of various faiths, want to study Hebrew in order to read the Bible in its original language.”

The energetic Tenney says she was introduced to JBI by her friend and mentor, Barbara Friedman, in 1996. She recalls seeing volunteers and staff at work in studios recording books on tape, which preceded the current digital technology. “I was amazed by it. I immediately felt that I wanted to participate.”

Now JBI's state-of-the-art recording complex and its renovated volunteer center enable volunteers to record and narrate the books and magazines that will join the over 13,000 titles that already comprise The Barbara and Stephen Friedman Talking Books Library.

"We've also expanded our geographical scope. Often working in conjunction with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, particularly in Russia and in Latin America, we send materials, free of charge, literally around the world."

Tenney's rise to the top of JBI is a natural extension of her lifelong commitment to volunteer work. As a girl in Brooklyn, she frequently visited a nearby children's hospital, where polio patients were being treated.

"I was 14," she recalls, "and I walked in and asked if there was anything I could do. And there was! In those days many people with polio were in iron lungs and others needed hot packs put on them to help strengthen muscles. I worked there through high school. It felt so good to be helping people in need.

Teachers Training Program which consisted of six week sessions for three summers with teaching and extra course work in between. I taught fourth grade for several years."

In the short time between college graduation and summer school, she married Warren. The Tenneys moved to White Plains, New York, where they raised three daughters: Amy, Laura and Alice—now the mothers of Tenney's six grandchildren. While the children were still young, Tenney participated in community affairs, including the League of Women Voters, the Girl Scouts (where she was a leader of the local troop) and the PTA of the North Street elementary school (where she eventually served as president.)

As the children grew older and as more women were joining the work force, she felt the need to move on to something more compelling and entered a program offered by Bank Street College that was designed to meet the need at that time for educating people with "life experience," as well as teaching experience, to become guidance counselors. After earning her master's degree, Tenney

became the guidance counselor for the academic school on the campus of the Wiltwyck School, a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed boys in Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

Simultaneously with her work at Wiltwyck, she was a member of the board of Westchester Jewish Community Services, a family service agency affiliated with UJA-Federation, and, having left Wiltwyck after 8 years, eventually became its president.

It was a few years later, when serving on the Distribution Committee at UJA-Federation, that Tenney met Friedman. Following in Barbara's footsteps, Tenney became chair of the Distribution Committee (subsequently called



"In college I majored in government and had no specific career plans. But the last semester of my senior year, I was inspired by my English history professor who urged those of us with no specific plans to go into teaching. I had never thought of doing that. It was shortly after WWII and there was a shortage of teachers. I enrolled in an Emergency

the Planning and Allocations Committee), and it was during that time that Friedman introduced her to JBI.

When it is suggested to Tenney she seems to end up in charge of all of the organizations she joins, she laughs.

"I went to both an all girls' high school and college and saw many talented women taking on important respon-



Above: Tenney at the Low Vision Clinic.

Opposite page: A visually impaired patient at the JBI Low Vision Clinic shows Tenney one of several specialized optical aids he uses to perform everyday tasks.

sibilities. Being a volunteer has been very satisfying. The more I know, the more I do for the organization, the more satisfying it is and the more committed I become.”

Her commitment to JBI led her to help develop a new dedicated children’s wing at the JBI Low Vision Clinic at the Surovsky Medical Center in Tel Aviv which JBI founded in the 1980s. She recently visited the Clinic with Dr. Ellen Isler, president and CEO of JBI.

“I went to Israel with Ellen to visit the Low Vision Clinic,” Tenney recalls. “There were people of all ages and with many different visual problems. We sat in the clinic’s waiting room and watched so many needy visually impaired patients from a huge cross section of the Israeli public come and go: a Russian immigrant child whose eye problems had been inadequately treated prior to moving to Israel, a distinguished retired veteran of the Israeli Defense Forces suffering from macular degeneration but desperate to be able to continue reading, a young woman, born with albinism of the eye, who designs jewelry thanks to specialized optometric devices created by the clinic’s staff. All were treated attentively as individuals. It was an amazing feeling. The need is great and we are doing our best to meet it.

“It was such a rewarding visit. Though the clinic in Israel is unique among JBI’s services because it is our only hands-on medical program, the visit reinforced my determination to spread the word of all of JBI’s services to help people whose vision problems make it impossible for them to read standard print even with corrective lenses.

“Here we are,” she says, smiling. “Come and get us!” **LM**