



Enriching The Lives Of The Visually Impaired

Jewish Braille Institute

The energetic Judy Tenney, an avid bridge, tennis and golf player, is passionate about her work as chairman of JBI (established in 1931 as The Jewish Braille Institute). This position, which she assumed in 2004, is the culmination of a lifetime of volunteering for Mrs. Tenney.

Since joining the board in 1999 and particularly since assuming the chairmanship, Tenney has been actively involved in guiding the expansion of the 78-year-old JBI, now a truly international organization. JBI offers the largest collection of Jewish and general interest books in the world for the blind and visually impaired. Over 95 percent of the books in its collection are unavailable from any other source in accessible format. JBI serves not only the blind with customized Braille, but also the many people with low vision for whom JBI produces Large Print as well as Talking Books.

The Baby Boom generation, numbering 78 million, is now beginning to need JBI's Talking Books more and more. A 2002 report from The National Eye Institute estimates that 20% of all Americans over the age of 65 suffer from severe visual impairment as a result of cataracts, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, macular degeneration or some other age-related vision problem.

Under Mrs. Tenney's leadership, in 2007 JBI began a renovation of its headquarters, a 100-year-old double brownstone in Murray Hill. The renovation created appropriate space for archiving of JBI's unique collection, established a training and volunteer center, and facilitated the creation of six state-of-the-art sound studios so that more people can volunteer to record more books and magazines.

Now JBI's digital recording complex and its renovated volunteer center enable over 100 JBI volunteers to record and narrate the books and magazines of Jewish and general interest that will join the over 13,000 titles in eight languages—English, Russian, Yiddish, Hungarian, Romanian, Hebrew, Polish and Spanish—that already comprise The Barbara and Stephen Friedman Talking Books Library.

Since taking the reins of JBI, Tenney has also expanded the scope of JBI nationally and internationally. JBI Talking Books Clubs in the U.S. bring together blind and visually impaired older adults for monthly discussion of the JBI audio books to which they have listened. And, working in conjunction with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, JBI now sends Talking Books in many languages, free of charge, literally around the world.

Tenney was introduced to JBI by her friend and mentor, Barbara Friedman, in 1996. She recalls seeing volunteers and staff at work in JBI's studios recording books on analog tape, which preceded the current digital technology. She was amazed by their dedication and ability and immediately felt the desire to participate.

Tenney's rise to the top of JBI is a natural extension of her lifelong commitment to volunteer work. When she was 14, Tenney walked into a Brooklyn children's hospital and asked if there was anything she 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. She worked there through high school and began to realize how rewarding it was to help people in need.

In the last semester of her senior year at Smith College, an English history professor urged the members of the class with no specific career plans to go into teaching. It was shortly after WWII and there was a shortage of teachers. She enrolled in an emergency Teachers Training Program which consisted of six week sessions for three summers with teaching and extra course work in between. Tenney taught fourth grade for several years.

Having married, she moved to White Plains where she was soon participating in community affairs. While her children were still young, Tenney was involved with many different organizations, among them, 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).

But as her children grew older, Mrs. Tenney decided to go back to school and entered a program offered by Bank Street College to train as a guidance counselor. 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, NY. Simultaneously with her work at Wiltwyck, she became a member of the board of Westchester Jewish Community Services, a family service agency affiliated with UJA-Federation, and, after leaving Wiltwyck 8 years later, she eventually became its president.

It was when serving on the Distribution Committee at UJA-Federation, that Tenney strengthened her friendship with Barbara Friedman. Following in Barbara's footsteps, Tenney became chair of the UJA-Federation Distribution Committee,



Dr. Levi Rothkoff, Mrs. Tenney, and a patient who retains some ability to read with customized lenses



Mrs. Judy Tenney at JBI's Low Vision Clinic in Israel

and it was during that time that she was introduced to JBI.

When it is suggested to Tenney that she seems to end up in charge of all the organizations she joins, she laughs. She attributes her success within different organizations to good role models. She believes that because she went to both an all girls' high school and college, she was able to witness so many talented women taking on important responsibilities. There is nothing that Mrs. Tenney finds more satisfying than being a volunteer. The more she knows, the more she does for the organization, the more satisfying it is and the more committed she becomes.

Tenney helped to develop a new dedicated children's wing at the JBI Low Vision Clinic at the Sourasky Medical Center in Tel Aviv, which JBI originally founded in the 1980s. When Mrs. Tenney visited JBI's Low Vision Clinic in Israel with Dr. Ellen Isler, JBI's President and CEO, she was enormously inspired by the diversity of patients of all ages and backgrounds, and intrigued with the many different types with

visual problems, all of which required creative solutions in an effort to maximize the residual vision in individual patients. The clinic in Israel is unique among JBI's services because it is JBI's only hands-on medical program.

The visit reinforced Tenney's determination to spread the word to all of JBI's services to help people whose vision problems make it impossible for them to read standard print even with corrective lenses. Mrs. Tenney is an inspiring leader whose credentials are not only impressive because of all that she has achieved, but also because of her wholehearted and lifelong devotion to others. JBI is privileged to have a Chairman who understands its mission and who, like JBI itself, is always willing to say "Yes!" to anyone in need. **M**

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