To stay young, you have to stay connected

By HEATHER RODRIGUEZ

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

"I want to give back to society," says Issacsehreff, who was born 35 years ago. A lifelong lover of literature and ideas, she taught Spanish language and literature for many years at Hunter College and City 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 I 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, JFB specializes in making Jewish literature and prayer books available on tape, 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 available, change to Americans, JFB records books on tape for clients in the U.S. and other countries.

The organization provides books on CD, digital recording or online. Within the next two 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 Karcher, manager of audio production for JFB. To use this new technology, JFB 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 Issacsehreff'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.

Issacsehreff 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 its own proofreading 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.

Issacsehreff'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 temporary blindness played a role. "Two or three years ago, I had cataract 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. Issacsehreff 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 is "Más Allá del 11 de Septiembre," by Dr. Luis Rosas Marcos. Its a first-person account of the 9/11 attacks written by a Spanish psychiatrist who was a witness and a friend of several firefighters. Rosas Marcos came to record the book in the studio.

Other titles include "Más Historias de la Carta de M. Padre," or "My Father's Court," by Nobel laureate Isaac Asimov; "Beethoven's Singer," translated from Yiddish into Spanish, it is a book of stories the author—son of a rabbi—wrote remembered from childhood.

Issacsehreff is in the process of launching an audio magazine for beneficiaries of JFB's Spanish-language program. Clients can send the access to books and prayer provided by Issacsehreff and other volunteers and employees.

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

"I called up the girl at JFB 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.