

Patti Gregory-Chang
Braille in stages

My Braille story is incremental. I use Braille every day but have come to it in stages.

When I was first diagnosed, I was instructed in Braille once or twice a week. My teacher came for 45 minutes three days a week. I was to learn cane travel, Braille, and all of the other adaptive techniques in this short amount of time. She often missed days in the Winter.

So, I learned to read with one hand rather than two. I performed well in high school, college and at the University of Chicago Law School. I didn't use Braille much.

I found a job as an Assistant Corporation Counsel with the City of Chicago Law Department and I started appearing in court. I was in trouble. I had no way to read in front of the judge. So, I gave myself a crash course in Braille. I read every extra moment I had to achieve enough competency to read quotations or citations to the Judge. I read almost everything from shorthand notes or outlines. I began reading Braille for pleasure with the Harry Potter books. It took me more than a year to get through them.

In 2006 I was elected as a state president of the National Federation of the Blind and in 2008 I was elected to the Board of Directors of the National organization. Now, reading outlines and small quotes wasn't enough. I needed to be able to deliver entire reports and speeches before large audiences. So, I gave myself another crash course in reading Braille. I practice my speeches and reports over and over but I do read them from Braille word for word. I don't lose special turns of phrase or structure as I would if I were to present ad-hoc from an outline.

I can read 100 or so words a minute. Do I wish I were faster? Yes. Do I wish I had had better instruction for more time at the age of twelve when I first learned Braille? Of course. But, none of that means that my Braille is not essential to me every day. I use a Braille-Note. My calendar and case notes are in Braille. I speak all over the country from Braille text. I continue to present to judges from Braille. It is still an essential tool despite my unusual method of mastering it. I cannot imagine actually succeeding in my job without it as one of my tools.