BrailleNotes puts the world—the Internet—at the fingertips of those with vision impairments.
Steve Booth’s first experience with technology for the visually impaired was less than auspicious.

When Booth, who is blind, was about six years old, the Fitchburg Community Lions Club of Massachusetts joined forces with the local police department to purchase a Braille writer (a machine similar to a typewriter that allows users to communicate in Braille) for him. His parents, who wanted to surprise their son with the device, made arrangements to pick it up at the police station.

What they hadn’t counted on: their little boy freaking out when he heard they were going to see the police. “They’re practically dragging me,” he remembers, “and I’m protesting ‘No! I won’t do it!’ Finally they had to tell me, ‘Look, you’re going to get something! You’re not going to jail!’”

Nearly 50 years later, it’s Booth’s turn to help make assistive technology for the blind accessible to people who need it. Now a Braille specialist for the National Federation of the Blind as well as president of the Baltimore Host Lions Club, he worked with his club a few years ago to help donate BrailleNotes—small computers that allow Braille users to access e-mail, word processing programs, and the Internet—to visually impaired high school students. “I thought, ‘The Lions gave me something. I should give something back,’” he says.

BrailleNotes are just one of many technological devices that are expanding Lions’ abilities to help blind and visually impaired people perform the functions that sighted people take for granted: use a computer, read a menu, navigate a city street.

While older methods such as Braille writers, white canes, and Leader dogs are anything but obsolete, learning about the newer options available can help Lions make the most informed decisions possible when considering donation requests.

One of the hottest assistive devices on the market is a small instrument with a big name: the Kurzweil-National Federation for the Blind Mobile Visionary Devices.
Reader, or K-NFB Mobile Reader. Small enough to fit into a shirt pocket, the Reader combines the functions of a cell phone and a digital camera with technology that converts text to speech. The user takes a photo of a printed document such as a restaurant menu, ATM receipt or even a dollar bill. In about 30 seconds, an electronic voice reads the text out loud.

“It’s one of the most exciting pieces of technology that’s come out,” says Ramona Walhof, a blind person who is president of the Boise Capital Lions Club and past president of the National Federation of the Blind of Idaho. “It’s really a major thing as far as making more information accessible.”

As a tester for the Reader before it was released on the market, Walhof astonished her fellow Lions by demonstrating the device at a meeting. “I just took the restaurant’s menu and read it, which I’d never been able to do,” she says. If they like, users can then save that information in a file and transfer it to a computer later. Users with partial vision can also enlarge and highlight text on the device’s screen.

The Reader’s technology has actually been around since the 1970s when an inventor named Ray Kurzweil created the first reading machine for the blind. Unfortunately, it was the size of a tabletop and cost more than $50,000, making it highly impractical for most individuals to own (with the exception of blind entertainer Stevie Wonder, who bought one of the first to roll off the line).

Not until recently was technology advanced enough to make a portable, handheld model like the K-NFB Mobile Reader. And at around $2,000, it’s a comparative bargain. Still, its price tag is steep enough to put it out of the reach of many blind or partially sighted people who could benefit from it.

That’s where clubs like the Little Elm Lions of Little Elm, Texas, step in. Last year, then-president Tony Licausi read an article about the Reader and showed it to affiliate member Tina Hager, who is the

Sleek technologies increase the freedom of the blind. The K-NFB Mobile Reader (top) reads aloud menus, receipts and paper money. BrailleNotes (center) is a small computer. The Trekker (bottom) combines speech output with GPS technology to increase mobility.
‘Cell phones generally won’t work for a blind person because they don’t talk. Touch screens are a blind person’s worst enemy. You can maybe place a call if you know the phone number, and that’s about it.’

director of the Little Elm Public Library. She decided that the library should purchase one of the devices for patrons to use. Her club agreed to donate most of the cost, and in short order, thanks to the Lions’ help, the library became what’s thought to be the first institution of its kind in the country to own a Reader.

“We were very excited when the Lions club donated the money to purchase it, because it’s definitely an asset to the library and the community,” Hager says. Library patrons with visual impairment can now come in and “read a book, read an article, read a newspaper, anything,” she adds. “It’s really an awesome piece of technology.” The library has also hosted demonstrations of the Reader for the Little Elm Lions as well as for other groups.

Last year the Brandon Lions Club of South Dakota partnered with the South Dakota Lions Foundation to donate a K-NFB Mobile Reader to Max Blaschke, a visually impaired student at Augustana College in Sioux Falls. “He [Blaschke] is very independent,” says M.J. Knobe, the foundation’s executive director. With the Reader, “he doesn’t have to have another human being to help him with a menu or at the library.”

But Blaschke has found another use for the device, too: helping him get from place to place. “It’ll help you read a street corner sign, if it’s not too far away, so you know where you are around town,” he says. “The alternative would be asking someone for help or doing the best you can to read the sign, which can sometimes be a little bit difficult.”

In another few years, the K-NFB Mobile Reader may gain the ability to even recognize objects and people.
Is your club considering donating a device to a blind or visually impaired person? First, advises Steve Booth of the National Federation of the Blind, make sure you understand that person’s abilities and needs: “Do they know Braille? Do they have some useful vision left? How much?”

Next, consider contacting the National Federation for the Blind, which can help your club make informed decisions about products to donate. “I would encourage any Lions club to please work with us,” Booth says. “Ordinarily a Lions club can only go to the vendors, and of course they’re going to tell you their products are great. Well, there might be other things you might not know about. We work with clubs to help them find the right products to fill their donation requests.”

Visit the NFB’s Web site at www.nfb.org or call (410) 659-9314.

or need the full functionality of the original Trekker. Lions who have donated Trekkers or Trekker Breezes include clubs in Grand Rapids, Grand Haven, and Rockford, Michigan.

Neither device is designed to replace a guide dog or cane, Ihrke hastens to add. “GPS is an orientation aid. A cane and a Leader dog are mobility devices,” she says. “So GPS will never replace a cane or a dog, because those detect obstacles and help you make your way through the environment, where GPS just tells you where you are.”

Braille is another form of assistance that will never be replaced, says Ramona Walhof of the Boise Capital Lions Club. “There are a bunch of people who think Braille’s going to be obsolete because of technology. Braille will be obsolete the same time print is,” she says. “A kid can get through school without Braille, and a lot of them are. But they need Braille for spelling, math, punctuation, and you can’t do that with [devices that use] speech output only. And then the kids graduate from high school as terrible spellers, not very good readers, weak in math. We’d like to see clubs across the country help promote Braille.”

After all, it’s not as if Braille and technology are mutually exclusive. Walhof herself uses a BrailleNote—a small Braille-enabled computer like the ones Booth’s club helped donate—and Blaschke uses one to take notes in his college classes. Unfortunately, Walhof says, many schools aren’t in a position to provide BrailleNotes for their students. Her club gets many requests for them because “the schools really have to struggle to come up with funds, and a lot of families just can’t afford it.” Again, these devices aren’t cheap—between $3,000 and $6,000. Lions who would like to donate BrailleNotes but have limited funds may consider partnering with another club.

Technologies such as K-NFB Readers, GPS Trekkers, BrailleNotes and the like not only help blind people function more effectively and independently but they also help their sighted acquaintances understand that there’s no need to pity or condescend to people with visual impairments. And by helping make these devices available to people who need them, Lions are helping to change the public perception of blindness. “It’s a more positive image of blindness you’re seeing in Lions clubs across the country,” Walhof says. “Yes, it’s a nuisance not to have vision. But it’s not the end of the world.”

The Trekker allows the blind to travel outside of their normal comfort zone.
‘Yes, it’s a nuisance not to have vision. But it’s not the end of the world.’