Alumnus Wins "Nobel Prize for Blindness"

Blind theology grad creates Braille code for biblical languages

| Posted on July 25, 2016

Ray McAllister, a blind alumnus of Andrews University, coded Braille for Hebrew and won what some consider to be "The Nobel Prize for Blindness."

By: Danni Francis

Andrews University Alumnus Ray McAllister became the first Adventist to win the prestigious Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award at the ninth annual awards event during the 2016 convention in early July. The award comes from the [National Federation of the Blind](#) (NFB) and includes the highest possible cash prize totaling $20,000. In addition to being a fully licensed massage therapist, McAllister is an adjunct teacher for the University's School of Distance Education & International Partnerships.

The [Jacob Bolotin Award](#) is a cash award program to recognize individuals and organizations working in the field of blindness that have made outstanding contributions toward achieving the full integration of the blind into society on a basis of equality.

"It is my prayer that this award will give me the recognition I need to negotiate with scholars around the world so I can have access to the text materials I need," says McAllister.

Jacob Bolotin, for whom the award is named, was a blind physician who lived and practiced in Chicago from 1912 until his death in 1924. The NFB prides itself as being "the only organization that believes in the full capacity of blind people, and has the power, influence, diversity and determination to help transform [their] dreams into reality."

This accomplishment is known in many circles as the Nobel Peace Prize of Blindness. McAllister, along with Sarah Blake LaRose, professional Braille transcriber, professor of Hebrew and alumna of Anderson University (Indiana) and Matthew Yeater, current president of the NFB in Michiana, comprise the Semitic Scholars.

The Semitic Scholars are a group of three blind academics who created a Braille code for ancient biblical languages so that source documents of religious texts can be studied independently by blind students in their original context—a task that was previously impossible.

In 2010, after becoming the first totally blind person to earn a PhD with a concentration in Old Testament, which he earned from the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary on the campus of Andrews University, McAllister began this project by utilizing his resources which included computer-code-style files which used letters, numbers and punctuation to represent Greek and Hebrew symbols. McAllister utilized a computer that would convert these symbols into Braille letters and show them on a Braille display, which is a device using something similar to magnetic pins that pop up in the shape of Braille words. However, McAllister needed something that would appear more like Braille Greek and Hebrew, just with extra symbols.

McAllister developed coding for the symbols not already established in Braille. Hebrew has accents which help one know when to pause while reading and which can be used to inform readers how to chant or sing the text, but these symbols were not previously charted in Braille Hebrew.

"Since chanting is a task a blind person can enjoy, I felt the need to prepare Hebrew Bibles in Braille with all these symbols," explains McAllister. "Once I developed these symbols, I needed to have them peer reviewed."

In 2007, LaRose developed a Braille table for Biblical Greek and Hebrew with all its technical markings. Through guidance from LaRose, McAllister completed a system that could be used to prepare texts that the blind could use. Using this system and Microsoft Word's "search and replace" function along with the Aleppo Hebrew Bible, McAllister translated the text into Braille.

"I converted that entire Hebrew Bible, accents and all, into Braille, and, yes, I have chanted Hebrew from it fluidly," says McAllister. "I also converted many other Hebrew documents, Semitic inscriptions, and many Greek documents into Braille."

In 2014, McAllister collaborated with Duxbury Systems, a company that produces software to convert documents of various languages into Braille. Through Duxbury, McAllister began working with Yeater. Yeater had been working with Duxbury to set up a system for converting biblical language documents containing many languages, including English, into Braille.

Through working with other key individuals, Duxbury is able to convert many ancient texts without using the "search and replace" function.

"It's definitely a lot easier relying on Duxbury to do most of the translation into Braille," says McAllister. "My dreams for the future of this project are simple: I wish to have more texts in more ancient languages in Braille format. Besides this, I have no idea how God will lead. I only know that he has led thus far, and what is to come will only be even more of an adventure."

Related Links

- Find your degree of interest in the [Seminary](#)
- Learn more about [biblical languages and religion studies](#) at Andrews University
- FAQ about [Duxbury Systems](#)
- [What is Braille](#)?

Contact:
PR
pr@andrews.edu
269-471-3322