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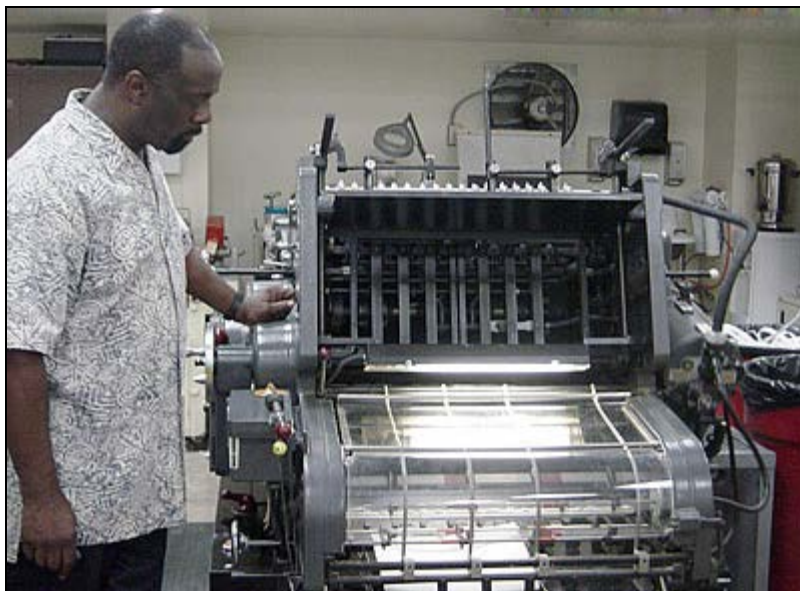
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Metro's Willie Thompson operates a press that makes the tactile letters and raised illustrations in Braille Institute books for the visually impaired.



Photos by Sarah Winfrey

Metro's Willie Thompson Helps the Visually Impaired 'See' Their World

- He operates a special press that prints Braille books

By SARAH WINFREY

(Oct. 17, 2006) Located inside the Braille Institute of Los Angeles is Universal Media Services, a secluded workshop whose employees strive to take down the barriers that face many visually impaired people.

"I realized that this was something amazing," says Metro's Willie Thompson, recalling his first impressions.

Thompson has two work families, one at Universal Media and one at Metro. At San Gabriel Valley Division 9, he's a part-time operator, driving morning runs.



Willie Thompson

He works afternoons at Universal Media operating "Heidi," one of two Heidelberg presses that form the raised images called tactile illustration.

Universal Media produces some 2 to 3 million pages a year for the visually impaired. In the warehouse, located at the Braille Institute's Sight Center, flags line the walls to represent each country the

organization sends material to.



Caitlin Hernandez, at left, enjoys a new Braille book just off the Universal Media presses. At right, Tiffany Kim concentrates on reading her Braille book. (Photos courtesy of Braille Institute)



Making the world a reality

Braille books and reading material are stacked high on tables where volunteers assemble the pages and bind the books. This is a place where the idea of understanding the world becomes a reality for people who can only read about it.

Such Braille Institute programs as Dots for Tots and Tact-Tales help children who are visually impaired learn about a world they cannot see.

Since both jobs are part time, Thompson can maintain two careers he loves: driving a Metro bus where he interacts with customers and helping produce Braille books that allow visually impaired children to read.

"We're like Mayberry," says Peter Mansinne, director of Universal Media, referring to the peaceful hamlet of the Andy Griffith Show. "We have this closeness with each other."

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