Dr. James Bickford, director of the VIL program, spoke at length with radio host Paul VanDyck on the show "Sounds of Awareness" on KBOO FM. on "the challenges of teaching visually impaired children and the difficulties of learning in a sighted world."

H: Hello and welcome to Sounds of Awareness, I'm Paul Van Dyke. In this half hour we discuss the attitudes and biases surrounding people with disabilities and the challenge of everyday life.

H: Well I'm sure looking forward to this semester. I've got my lesson plan all done, got my books in order, got my PowerPoint presentations, got my over head stuff here. Let's see. Who am I going to have in my class? Anderson, Bradford, Cole, Deliria- oh, who's this? Oh, I know who this one is, this is little Jane. Oh boy I'm going to have a blind girl in my class. Oh my god, how am I going to- what am I going to do now? I've never taught a- I don't know Braille or any of that stuff. God, maybe they can put her in a special class or something. I don't know. I've got 39 other kids I've got to deal with.

If you can imagine a teacher at the beginning of a semester looking at the list and going through that, and then, I have a blind- oh, I have never taught a blind person before, I guess I'm up to the challenge, but I've got all this other work I've got to do. This is not terribly uncommon and Doctor James "Blue" Bickford is our guest today and we're going to talk about issues like this; about the education of blind children. Dr. Bickford is the director of Project Braille and he is an assistant professor and has a number of other titles and we are going to talk about that today on Sounds of Awareness.

H: Good morning. Can I just call you Blue?

B: Please do, Paul.

H: Okay, well good morning, Blue. Gosh you have quite the background in education of blind kids and the first I heard of you, you were the principal at the Washington State school for the Blind but you've moved on to higher education and you're not teaching kids now, you're teaching teachers.

B: That's correct

H: Over at, let's see, is it Portland State?

B: Portland State University.

H: Portland State. Tell us what's happening with, first of all, Project Braille. That might be a good place to begin.

B: To give a little background first, Portland State University is the only teacher training program in the Pacific Northwest that prepares teachers specifically to work with blind and visually impaired children. There is a crisis need for teachers of blind child across the country. We know there are about 5000 positions open and available right now but there are no teachers there to fill them. So that's one of the things that we are attempting to do
through Portland State. Project Braille is a program that is funded through the Office of Special Education Programs through the United States Department of Education. And they are providing tuition support for students to come into the program throughout the Pacific Northwest, and in fact the western part of the country, so that they will become involved in a career in special education working specifically with blind and visually impaired children. So what this project does is to really get them involved not only in Special Education, but in that very very deep focus into blind and visual impairment so that they know how to teach kids with blindness or visual impairments; how to develop strategies, how to teach concepts to students. Think about teaching the concept of a tree to a blind student. It's this thing that you might be able to touch, but if you can't reach the limbs, you don't have the concept of a tree. How do you teach students to travel independently? How do you teach them to cross a street? How do you teach a student to make a hamburger or scramble eggs; comb their own hair? These are things that sighted kids learn to do by watching others. It's called incidental learning. So they watch their mom and their dad and their sisters and their brothers and they learn all of these things. But what you have a blind child, they have to be taught those things. And this is what we teach teachers to do at Portland State University.

H: I guess, being blind myself, what I hear you saying, I understand exactly what you're saying. It's like learning to read. As you're riding down the road in your parent's car you see, oh, look mom there's a McDonald's, there's a sign that says Coca Cola.

B: Exactly.

H: A blind child doesn't get those sort-of on-the-go lessons, as it were. And it's not to infer or imply that blind people are less intelligent or less capable, it's just that a lot of times we get less information in a form that we can use. It's sort of like the difference between Apple users, you know, Mac users and PC users, you know. Your Mac is a great computer, but it's not going to respond, as I have discovered recently, to commands that you give your PC.

B: Absolutely.

H: Because, it's just, they're different –

B: And we talk about that in terms of range and variety of experiences, especially for young blind children. As you so aptly pointed out, sighted kids get to be out in the environment; they get to see everything. They learn over 90% of what they learn through vision. A blind child doesn't have that opportunity. And the point about literacy is very well taken because that's one of the major concerns about young children in school is developing literacy skills. Because we know if a blind child does not have literacy skills, the opportunity for employment later on in life, that future, fifteen years ahead, is going to be severely minimalized. A sighted child, as you say, really starts to learn to read and to become literate at the age of three or four when they go down the road and they see the McDonald's sign. They're not really reading the sign, but they're recognizing it as a whole word. And then that later translates into reading skills. The blind child, again, is taught
directly how to read. And that may be through the use of print format or it may be through the use of Braille format. So, when we teach kids how to learn to read, we're not teaching Braille code per se, we're teaching reading but we're using Braille to do it. And that's one of the big differences in teaching reading between a sighted child and a blind child. So that's another focal point that we teach at the University so teachers will know how to do that.

H: One thing I'd like to just touch on a little bit, I've heard so many people say, 'Well, gee, with all the digital recordings, and you guys have the tapes, and the talking books, and all this audible material; why not just use that instead of teaching Braille? Gosh, Braille is so archaic and so bulky and so this and so that.' What's your answer to that?

B: My answer to that is that's been an ongoing argument probably for the last 40 years. When I first came into the field, in the early 1970's, talking books were out. And at that time, they were just moving from the vinyl records onto the reel to reel tape recorders. And people thought that Braille was going to go away because a blind person could now listen to everything. While listening is great, it is not literacy and what we are talking about, again, is literacy. And if you take literacy to mean interaction with the written word, we have to be able to interact with the word on a piece of paper, so that the individual gives meaning to what is being read. If I read you something, Paul, even if I try to remain neutral I'm going to give inflection to my words and to my speech. And you're going to take meaning from that. If you read it yourself you have the ability to figure out what it's saying and give your meaning to it and that is part of literacy. So while audio books are great, because not everything is available in Braille. While screen readers are phenomenal because it allows a blind person to go onto the internet and do everything on a computer that a sighted person is able to do. Electronic Braille displays are great because they allow you to access electronic material. We still get down to the basic issue of literacy and what is literacy. And do you want me to interpret everything for you or do you want to do it for yourself?

H: All right, and I might add to that point, Blue, a very practical reason. I work, as many of my long-time listeners know, as a medical transcriptionist. At the time I was attending school the policy was if you had any vision whatsoever they would teach you print. 'You don't need Braille if you can see.' Well, we would read books that were written in maybe 16 or 18 point type and hold them up right at the end of our nose, you know. That kind of thing. You can always tell when a blind person's been using your computer by the nose prints on the screen. That kind of, you know, jokes. Sort of like the blonde with the white out, you know, that's old. That's been around a while. But, point being, as a medical transcriptionist when I first starting taking that course I thought I wasn't going to do real well because I was not a good speller. Why was I not a good speller? Well, because the mechanics of reading was so difficult. If you're reading twenty words a minute in print when you could learn Braille and learn to read… Gosh, there's a gal over at the school now working in their Braille access center. Name is Judy Sworter.

B: And reads over 300 words a minute.
H: This woman reads faster than most radio announcers can read, you know, take a piece of something that's written out and read it cold. Just bum bum bum bum bum bum bum. And it's amazing in the sense that she can do that, but on the other hand sighted people can read print that fast and it's not amazing. I mean, Judy is amazing. Let's face it. But why is it amazing to us that she can read 300 words a minute?

B: Because as sighted people we think Braille has to be difficult.

H: Therein lies the resistance I think. People think it has to be difficult.

B: Therein lies part of the resistance. Part of the resistance, too, is if you have a child in a school setting that can only access a prepared teacher of the blind once a week or twice a week to learn Braille, whereas they can access print on a daily basis they will go with the print so the child is more likely to keep up with their classmates. This happens more commonly in elementary schools. What some of the research is now telling us, and has been for a number of years, is that if early on you choose a primary reading medium based upon the visual impairment, how the child accesses information- (We actually call it a learning media assessment) -then we can choose Braille or print and make them efficient readers. We're seeing more and more Braille readers, again, who have remaining vision. And then those who have remaining vision tend to move away from the large print material and go to optical aides. So we're seeing a difference than what was there when you were in school back in ancient times, Paul.

H: You know, I tell kids today that school was a lot easier for me because when I went to school writing hadn't been invented yet. Some of them get it. Some of them don't. You know, God I'll be sixty in March. Gee whiz. Now, you touched on another thing and that is you mentioned the itinerant teacher coming around. One of my friends has a nephew who is vision impaired and who wants to read large print because that's what the other kids are doing. The other kids get what they want by seeing and he wants to not be different, you know. And reading the Braille, even at that young age seems to have a bit of a stigma to it which I think is very unfortunate. And of course my friend says, 'Oh, well my little nephew gets his own private blind skills teacher once a week for forty five minutes. They have this special teacher come in just for him. Isn't that wonderful?' And I'm going, 'Gee, that's kind of sad. That's a little bit like saying, 'Mom's in a nursing home and they actually have someone cook a meal just for her once a week. Gee, isn't that wonderful?' You know, the kid gets to have Braille.

B: When we talk about kids in the school system, too, we have to remember that there's certainly a wide variety. And we use the term blind very generically. There are students who are blind with no sight whatsoever. There are students who are blind that can see light, that can see objects, but they can't see print so they're Braille readers. Then there are students who have a great deal of remaining vision that run from an acuity of 20/70, which is almost good enough to drive but not quite, all the way down to you have hold a piece of paper up to your nose to be able to read the print on it. So there is a difference in how much time a student would get from a teacher of the visually impaired. The more severely visually impaired the student is, the more time that that teacher should be giving
them. Where we come to a problem in the schools- And it's not the same everywhere. For example, it's different in the state of Washington than it is in Oregon. Because in Oregon we have what's known as a regional program system. The regional program is funded out of the Department of Education in Salem and they hire teachers for the visually impaired for an entire geographic region. So, for example, if you're living in Portland you're served out of the Columbia regional program and that program serves kids from Portland all the way out to Hood River. If you live in Astoria you're served out of the office that's in Hillsboro which is the NW regional program. So these teachers have to balance their time. They go from school to school, district to district. And try to balance their time between driving, which is what we call windshield time. Some of our itinerant teachers may spend half of their time behind a steering wheel rather than working with a kid.

H: Oh my gosh.

B: And then, based upon that child's individual needs: whether they are totally blind, academic, Braille reader, multiple disabilities, early intervention, preschool child. There's only so many hours in the week that they can give. The best practices says that we should have approximately one teacher for every eight children who are blind and visually impaired. A few states have legislated that. Neither Washington or Oregon have done that. So that's a difference and as you get out into the rural parts of the state, not only here in Oregon but across the country, you'll see teachers covering more and more territory. For example, going back to Oregon if you look at the central Oregon regional program that is headquartered in Bend. That covers kids all the way north to the Columbia and all the way south to Nevada.

H: Wow.

B: That's a lot of time behind a steering wheel of a car. Especially during winter months. And there are, I'm thinking five teachers that serve all the kids in that program and all of that territory. And it gets even more sparse when you get over into eastern Oregon and that office is located out of Pendleton and goes down over the mountains to La Grande, Baker City, Ontario, and down into Malheur county. So there aren't enough teachers and I think one of the issues that we're facing is that parents are afraid to advocate for their students because they don't know what's out there and what their students should be receiving. As in many special education circumstances, not just in the field of blindness and visual impairment, they see a specialized teacher come in and work with their child once or twice a week or maybe even in a resource room and they think, 'This is great. This is wonderful.' But not knowing what is really available.

H: Wow. Well, Dr. James "Blue" Bickford is our guest today on Sounds of Awareness and we're talking about a lot of things. About Project Braille and his being an assistant professor, teaching teachers how to work with blind and visually impaired kids. And wow. That would be- If you're going into be a teacher there's quite a demand for specialized teachers in that field, isn't there?
B: If you would like to become a teacher of blind and visually impaired children I can guarantee you a job. In fact, in the current program- And we were talking about Project Braille a little bit earlier, that provides some tuition support for students coming in, currently have twenty eight students. Now, what's frightening about those twenty eight students is not the students themselves, but of those twenty eight, eighteen are already employed as teachers of the visually impaired without training.

H: Man.

B: And they were given an emergency licensure to work with kids because they needed somebody there. Now, four of those students have jobs promised to them as soon as they graduate and the rest of the students, which I think is like six maybe. I've lost count. If history is any indicator, they will be offered positions during their student teaching. So when the program ends in June, or their cycle ends in June, I will have no applicants should there be any openings here in Oregon or Washington. And that's happening across the country.

H: Now, for people who say 'Well, all our jobs are going to Mexico and to China and India and so on,' if you want a job and especially if you're interested in teaching this is probably the way to go. Kind of on the other end of that spectrum, let me ask you this. Have you trained any blind individuals to be teachers?

B: Absolutely. And when we say blind, again, we have trained teachers who have low vision who are classified in that category of legal blindness. 20/200 acuity or worse. And they have either used print or Braille and we have trained teachers who are totally blind.

H: Now, I will tell you- This may sound a little bit like a commercial, but it's not meant to. Braille is not all that difficult. When I was in the 7th grade learned the Braille alphabet and was reading, you know, Fun with Dick and Jane, and some of these beginning books, basically to get my hands in it so to speak. It took me about two weeks to learn the real basics of Braille. And we don't, on this program, need to necessarily go into Braille shorthand, you know, grade two and all that kind of thing. Braille is a little easier to learn that Morse code, I discovered. {laughs}

B: {Laughs}

H: Although, I have that under my belt too. So, you're an assistant professor over at Portland State.

B: Correct.

H: So, is that basically what you're doing over there now, is just teaching teachers?

B: That's my position, yes. There are two faculty in the program. Cheryl Grindol is the other faculty, and she's a long time teacher of blind and visually impaired students, as well. But, we are a graduate level program, so if anyone is interested, and I guess here's
my plug: you do have to have a bachelor's degree already and then the program for licensure lasts an entire year as a full time student. It's 48 hours of graded classes, which includes: literary Braille, which is your contracted Braille, what books are written in. It includes Nemeth code, for mathematics. It includes how to teach daily living skills, independent living skills, orientation and mobility, how to complete a school assessment, because you need to know what a student can do before you teach him to do something new so, there are assessment components. How to teach reading: when you teach reading in Braille, it's different than when you teach reading in print. It's not the same.

H: It's different.

B: How do you teach mathematics when you can't see graphs, and charts, and bar graphs? How do you use a calculator? How do you use technology? We teach all of those things. But as I say, it is a graduate level program, so you do have to have a bachelor's degree. Now, the other unique thing, while I'm on the topic, is that we are a very unique program in the country. There are only 24 universities across the country that prepares teachers, through a degree program, to work with blind children. We are one of them. Now, we are also one of four programs across the country that carries on a distance education program for preparing teachers. So that means, I have students from Hawaii and Washington and Oregon and Idaho, all the way out to Maryland and Georgia this year, who are accessing our program because they have no place to go for training. And they can take all of their classes in their home state while working with kids in their home state. So we're serving not only Washington and Oregon as a regional program, we're serving the entire country.

H: You know, as a consequence of having good teachers and good education for blind kids, you know, that may just be one of the keys to success in the job market. Maybe we can go, as blind people as a group, from 70% unemployment maybe to a higher rate of employment. Because I know that with my particular line of work, if I couldn't read, write, or spell I would not be working in the position I am in.

B: And the research tells us, and there was a research study done by the name of Ruby-Riles, actually out of Washington State, that looked at Braille and literacy. Those students who are literate and can read well, and when we say read well, you know, 120 to 150 words a minute, either in print or in Braille, are the ones that are employable. Those who do not read well, even though they may be highly intelligent, tend not to be employable. And that's frightening.

H: Wow.

B: Because we want our children to get everything that any other kid in a public school setting receives. And that goes back to equality of education. So that's what we're trying to accomplish with Project Braille, is to get more teachers out there, serve more students, so they have a better chance.
H: Now one of the consumer groups, I think actually both of the one in particular, I think basically tries to get the credit for something the Braille Literacy Bill being passed here in Washington state, as I understand it, you can correct me if I'm wrong, that every blind or visually impaired child must be given the opportunity to learn Braille.

B: That's actually part of Federal Law. Federal Law, under the Individuals with Education Disabilities Act, says that if you meet the requirements for legal blindness, you shall be taught Braille unless you can justify that they can be efficient in print. So that is part of Federal Law and that has been adopted in Washington as part of state law, they had to do that. Now, one of the consumer organizations did the National Federation of the Blind, and I was part of that committee back in the mid-90's, was to have a Braille Bill introduced in Washington, because Washington state does not have any licensure for teachers of blind kids. So they introduced a bill that required that if you're teaching a child Braille, you must show through an exam that you actually know Braille.

H: Well, yeah, that would make sense.

B: It seems like one of these, excuse me, 'duh!' But since Washington has no licensure and Washington is one of two states in the nation that does not have licensure for teachers of blind kids, the Federation, and really it was a collaborative effort to say, okay, no licensure, at least say that if you are going to teach a child Braille and you're going to produce Braille materials, you have to show that you know Braille.

H: Alright, well you know at this point, I have to show that I know where we are on the clock. And it is one of these things again where we said, boy I don't know if we can talk for a half an hour and we've certainly done that and have a lot more to go. Doctor James 'Blue' Bickford. Blue, would you be interested in coming back sometime and doing another program with us?

B: Oh, sure. I can always get on my soapbox.

H: That would be really great. It's been great having you. Dr. Bickford is in charge of Project Braille, he's an assistant professor over at Portland State University. We're really glad to have you on the program today. Thanks so much for coming.

B: Thank you, Paul. I appreciate it.

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H: This as been 'Sounds of Awareness'. For more information about our program and guest, please visit our screen reader-friendly website at www.soundsofawareness.org. The address again is www.soundsofawareness.org. This program is independently produced for KBOO FM and FETV channel 11 by Paul and April Van Dyke. It is recorded in Shaka Sounds Studios in Vancouver, Washington and our audio engineer is Dave Craft. Thank you for listening, everyone.