

She Helps the "Forgotten" Blind

After watching her nearly sightless son struggle with the blurred images in standard texts, Lorraine Marchi put thoughts into action **By THEODORE IRWIN**

GENE MARCHI, JR., cherubic and cheerful, was four months old when an eye specialist discovered that his vision was impaired. How much he would ever see, the doctor couldn't predict.

The diagnosis was understandably a shock to his mother, Lorraine Marchi, the vibrant, brown-eyed wife of a San Francisco builder.

"When the doctor broke the news, I was numb," she recalls. "I couldn't weep for my baby, nor even feel bitter or resentful. I was thankful that at least he wasn't totally blind. But gradually I began to realize the implications."

It turned out that Gene's visual acuity in his better eye was only 20/200 (10 percent of sight), which meant that while he could see, he was considered "legally blind."

"I thought that when Gene went to school," Mrs. Marchi says, "he'd merely have to hold his books closer. I never dreamed there were people who, even with corrective lenses, could not read normal print."

Like Gene, more than 90,000 school children in the U.S. live in such a twilight zone—the no man's land between the seeing and the sightless. Only one in 10 is receiving special help at school.

Mrs. Marchi was passionately determined to give her son the education to which every American child has a right. In the 16 years since that terrible day at the doctor's office, she has relentlessly fought to develop large-type books which Gene and others like him could read. In the process, she has opened windows of learning for thousands of such youngsters and sparked a national organization dedicated to aiding them.

The long uphill struggle began when Gene entered first grade. Because he was "legally blind," he was transferred to a school for the blind where he could be taught Braille. Then his mother heard of a special sight-saving class at a San Francisco elementary school.

Theoretically the youngsters in the sight-saving class were to be taught with texts printed in oversize type. But there were virtually no such schoolbooks available, except for a few hand-copied pages. The teacher appealed to Mrs. Marchi.

The dynamic young housewife was fired to action. For more than a year she investigated conditions in other California cities. Once Mrs. Marchi thought she had found the answer in a newly developed magnifier for enlarging print. When that proved impractical for schoolroom use, she continued her stubborn search.

Armed with facts, she called on health officials, heads of special education departments, leaders of civic organizations, prominent ophthalmologists, pediatricians, and psychiatrists. Under her stimulus, a Committee to Aid Visually Handicapped Children was formed.

With borrowed typewriters, a group of volunteers began to transcribe books into large print. They prepared 500 master copies of 12 books to be printed by an offset process. Then a local hospital offered the use of its multigraph machine. Mrs. Marchi waited three months, but the operator couldn't find time to print the books.

Panicky at the thought that the school year would start without her precious books, the tenacious mother took over herself, after brief lessons on how to run the complex equipment.

Singlehanded, working nights and weekends, she spent almost four weeks printing 25 copies of seven books. But they were finished for the opening of school—and jubilantly welcomed.

FOR THE FIRST TIME, a partially seeing child knew how it felt to have a book of his own. It was Mrs. Marchi's initial triumph.

A year and a half later, a multigraph machine contributed by a local women's organization was installed in the basement of the Marchi home. Today there are two machines, and with the aid of several assistants Mrs. Marchi still produces large-type books there.

As word of the unique service in San Francisco spread across the nation, the need for a national organization became evident. In December, 1959, National Aid to the Visually Handicapped, a nonprofit volunteer agency, was founded in California.

Today chapters have been chartered or are springing up in six cities outside San Francisco. NAVH has produced more than 22,500 volumes of 169 titles—including books on everything from



Mrs. Marchi (right) and volunteer look on as Gene examines first large-type book his mother made.

science and spelling to novels.

Meanwhile, Gene Marchi, Jr., the boy whose affliction started the ball rolling, has grown up almost like any normal child. Today, a junior in high school, Gene rides a bicycle and plays basketball and football despite his handicap.

To Lorraine Marchi, the rewards of her efforts go beyond the satisfaction of watching her son's heartening progress.

"I find a deep joy," she says, "in knowing that similarly afflicted children now have the chance to get an education through books—the proper books to help them grow into self-sufficient, contributing members of their community."

To near-blind children who yearn for the light of learning, Lorraine Marchi is bringing a bright beacon of hope into their lives.

(For its catalog of large-type books, or to send contributions, address National Aid to the Visually Handicapped, San Francisco 21, Calif.)

COVER:

Summertime is a perfect time to touch a leaf, tuck your toes into a running brook, or pick a pair of daisies, as this lovely miss does. Photo by Josef A. Schneider.

Family Weekly

June 24, 1962

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