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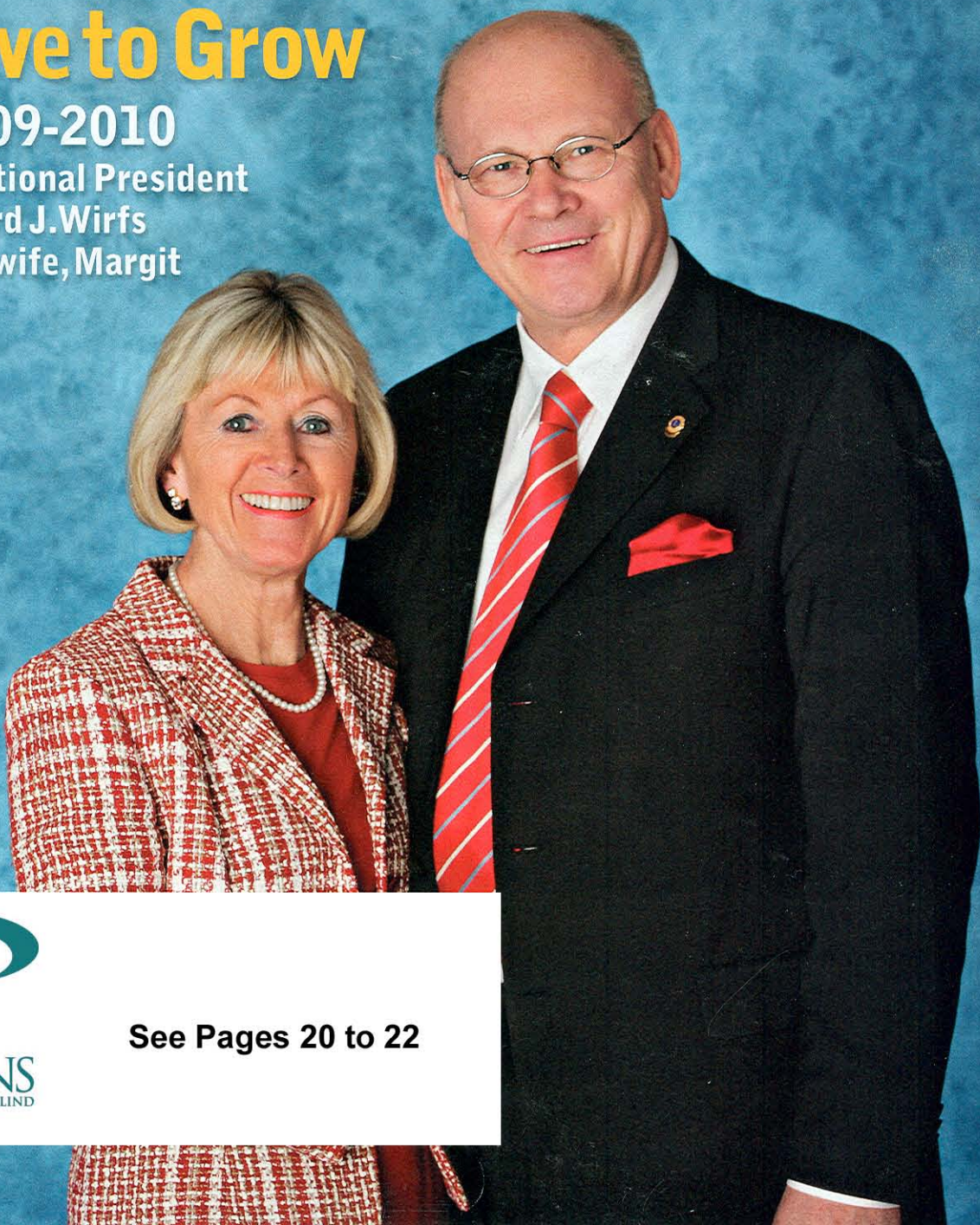
Lions Clubs International

WWW.LIONSCLUBS.ORG JULY/AUGUST 2009

Move to Grow

in 2009-2010

International President
Eberhard J. Wirfs
and his wife, Margit



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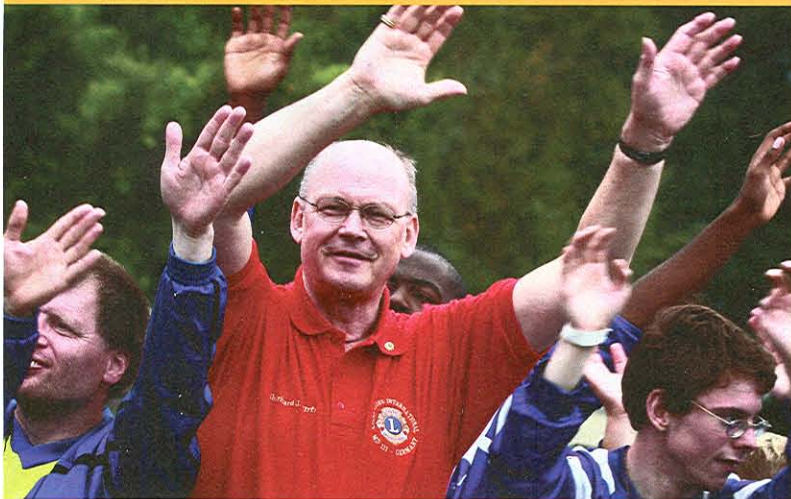
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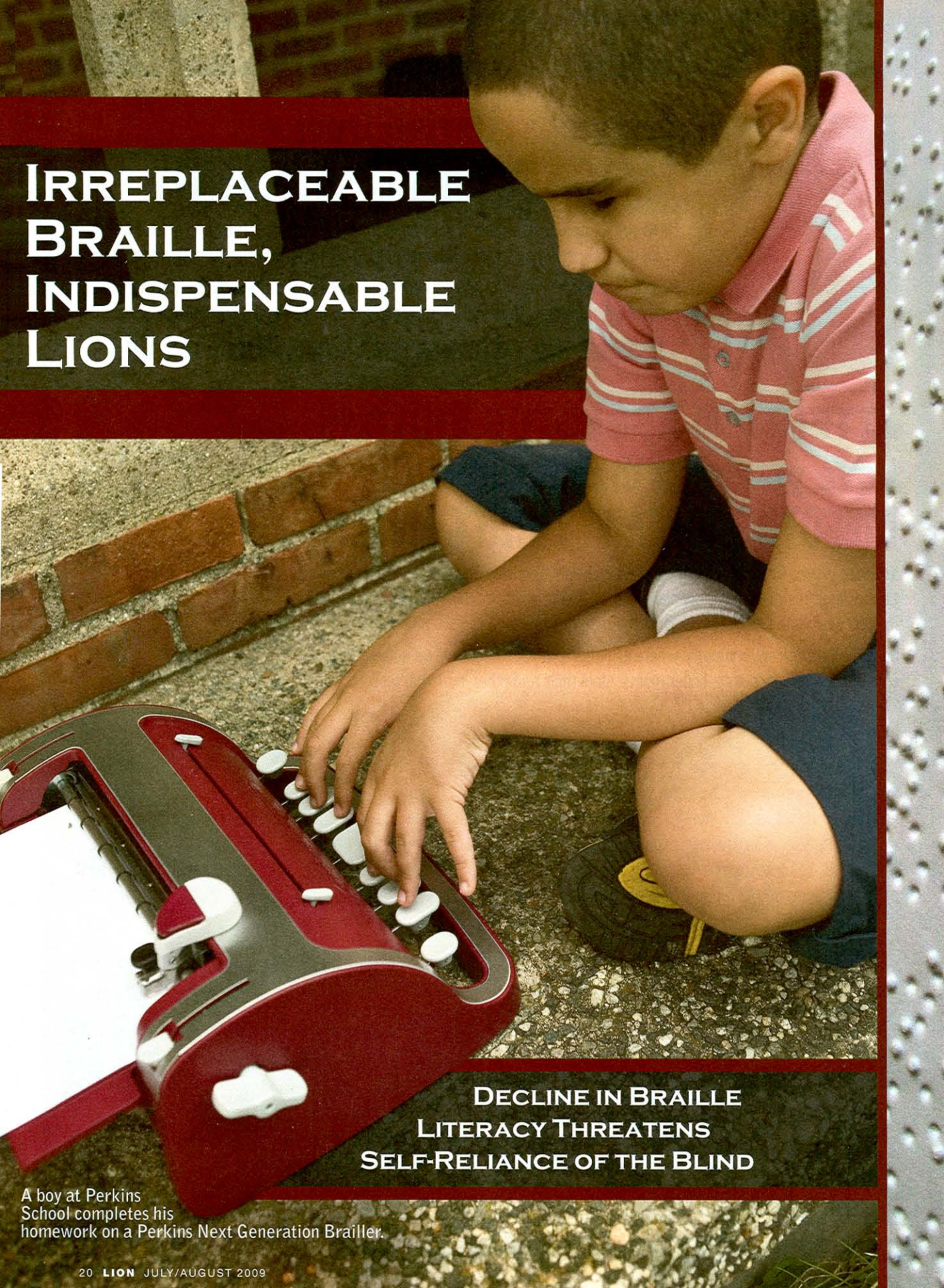
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IRREPLACEABLE BRAILLE, INDISPENSABLE LIONS

**DECLINE IN BRAILLE
LITERACY THREATENS
SELF-RELIANCE OF THE BLIND**

A boy at Perkins School completes his homework on a Perkins Next Generation Braille.

Brian Charlson lost his sight in an accident in 1966 when he was 11. The Lions in Milwaukie, Oregon, promptly gave him a Perkins Braille, a Braille typewriter. Like tens of thousand of others with visual impairments, Braille improved his ability to learn and propelled him toward self-reliance.

"I still use it [the Braille] today," says Charlson, a Lion in Newton, Massachusetts, and vice president of computer training services at the Carroll Center for the Blind. "Braille and the Lions were then, and continue to be, very, very important in my life."

Sadly, stories like Charlson's are becoming less frequent as Braille literacy is rapidly declining. Only 10 percent of visually impaired children are learning Braille, according to the National Federation of the Blind. In its heyday in the 1950s and 60s, the rate of Braille learning topped 50 percent. Ironically, this year marks the 200th birthday of Louis Braille, who created the system of raised dots that represent the alphabet as a 15-year-old blind boy in France.

The decline has multiple causes. Doctors are saving more medically fragile babies, many of whom are not only blind but also lack the physical or cognitive ability to learn Braille. More significantly, blind students typically now attend public schools. Instead of studying every subject using Braille each day, students receive sporadic instruction from itinerant Braille specialists. Yet another blow to Braille literacy are advances in technology such as software that "speaks" the text on a computer screen. Parents and teachers of blind students embrace the slick technologies instead of old-fashioned Braille.

But Braille literacy is a key to advanced education and better jobs, say advocates for the blind. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (interpreted by the American Federation for the Blind) shows that more than three-fourths of legally blind adults in the United States are unemployed or under-employed. Yet 90 percent of the blind who are employed use Braille. More than just a tool, "Braille seems to represent competence, independence and equality," according to a U.S. Department of Education study.

The crisis in Braille literacy needs urgent attention, says Steven Rothstein, a Lion in Newton and president of Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, which in 1887 dispatched a young new teacher named Annie Sullivan to Alabama to teach an unruly young girl named Helen Keller. "If literacy rates had gone down so dramatically for the general population, there would be a public uproar," he says.

The new technologies, though welcome, threaten to tarnish Braille as obsolete. "Society does not excuse sighted children from learning to read and write print just because they can watch TV and download audio books to their iPods," says Rothstein.

People with low or progressively failing vision struggle with large print and cumbersome magnifiers, straining to

- 1809** Louis Braille born in Coupvray, France
- 1812** Braille blinded by infection following an accident.
- 1814** Capt. Charles Barbriere creates code using groups of twelve raised dots to represent different sounds. "Night writing" allows soldiers to read messages safely in the dark.
- 1824** Braille completes his streamlined tactile reading alphabet. Each group (cell) of six dots stands for a letter.
- 1837** First book produced in Braille.
- 1949** UNESCO regulates Braille for worldwide use in roughly 200 languages and dialects.
- 1951** David Abraham, a Perkins School for the Blind teacher, develops the Perkins Braille®, most common Braille typewriter in the world today.
- 1960s** U.S. Braille usage peaks in 1963, followed by steep decline. Computerized Braille printing invented.
- 1975** Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) leads to mainstreaming of students with visual impairments. Braille literacy wanes further.
- 1980s** Audio computer screen readers and other adaptive devices introduced. Braille literacy slides.
- 1990s** Studies say Braille users are far more likely to find good jobs than non-users.
- 2006** Authorities report 5 million children worldwide are not schooled because they are blind or have multiple disabilities.
- 2008** Perkins Products partners with American Printing House for the Blind to redesign the Perkins Braille. *The Next Generation* is expected to make Braille more accessible to more people worldwide. View details at www.perkins.org/nextgeneration.

read print at a laborious pace, while Braille readers can keep pace with their sighted peers. The excessive time needed to read-by-listening causes students to fall behind both in school and in social interactions. "A student cannot learn spelling, grammar, and writing skills by listening alone," says Roz Rowley, a partially sighted Braille teacher at Perkins.

Perkins has been a longtime leader in Braille advocacy. In 1957, it introduced the Perkins Braille, still in use today particularly in developing countries where electricity and computers are luxuries. Perkins also offers a more contemporary Braille, the Next Generation Braille, that offers greater portability and functionality.

Celebrating Louis Braille's 200th birthday, Perkins Braille & Talking Book Library presented prizes for essays on the value of Braille. Meet the winners:

Samantha Lylis, 19, Merrimack, New Hampshire, who attends Perkins School for the Blind: "Reading my first book, *Sleepy Dog*, was very exhilarating. After I finished, I exclaimed 'Mommy, now I can read books by myself and tuck *you* into bed!' Mom laughed with joy and pride. This experience really changed my life." Lylis also reads Braille in French and Spanish.

Kayla Bentas, 18, Peabody, Massachusetts, lost her vision at age nine, after brain surgery: "Before I lost my sight, my class had been learning about ... Braille. I was excited to learn a new language that I already knew something about." The Peabody Lions Club provided screen-reader software for Bentas' computer. She founded the non-profit Kayla's Vision and has built a \$40,000 endowment. She plans to study management and accounting in college.

Timothy Vernon, 25, a utilities customer service representative from Mansfield, Massachusetts, says Braille allowed him to excel at Fitchburg State College. "Audio information is an excellent medium, but it does not provide the independence offered by Braille. On a professional level, fluency in Braille helps me compete with my sighted colleagues." As a boy, the Mansfield Lions Club gave him a head start with a gift of a Speak & Spell device to help boost his vocabulary.



In Ghana, two friends walk to school with their Perkins Brailer.

Photo courtesy of SightSavers International

Lions, too, remain staunch advocates of Braille (as well as embracing other technologies):

- The Ponchatoula Lions in Louisiana and Lions from four other clubs raised funds for a specialized electronic device to help an 8-year-old girl learn Braille. "She was ecstatic. She got on that thing right away. As far as computers go, well, those things will make a monkey of you. But not Emily. As fast as she could type, she could talk to you with that machine," says Lion Wayne "Big Un" Aymond.
- In the high-tech epicenter of California's Silicon Valley, Salinas Host Lions support rehabilitation and education services for those living with vision loss including Braille instruction. "The written word is so powerful in becoming all you can be," says Lion Liz Crooke. "Braille literacy opens up a whole world of knowledge to people who are blind." When District 4-C6 Lions updated the Lions Silicon Valley Center for the Blind, they upgraded the Braille library and its computers that create, print and store documents in Braille.
- The Metropolitan Lions of Jacksonville have supported Braille literacy for more than 30 years at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine. "We want to help, yes, but we want that help to be something that makes it possible for that person to participate in society," says past club president Roger Palmer. "It's like the movie *Pay It Forward*. I'm not doing it so I can see the results myself. Hopefully they will learn and grow and be able to do their part to help that next person forward."

Charlson, the Lion who was blinded as a boy, uses high-tech devices including computers with "refreshable" Braille. But he knows from experience the value of manual Braille. A few years ago his plane was landing when he pulled out his refreshable Braille device to check the address of his hotel. Its memory had failed. "I didn't know where I was staying," he says. "Now I always carry my itinerary on three-by-five cards that I made on my Perkins Brailer." ■