

“ Accessible ebooks help increase opportunities for individuals with disabilities to learn how to become professors, musicians, and even a radio host like me – or any career you can imagine. ”

— ROBERT LEWIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MARYLAND’S RADIO READING NETWORK



CHALLENGE

Robert Lewis grew up in the heart of Baltimore’s inner city which was a rough neighborhood for a black child who was blind. At times, it was filled with gangs and discrimination against people of color and people with disabilities. Robert would often sneak the family radio into his bedroom to listen to music and talk shows. “If I didn’t have a person to read to me, I was unable to learn things that piqued my curiosity,” says Robert. “I read braille, but it took a lot of time and effort.” Blindness forced him to rise above these barriers and understand that when something is taken away from you, you try to survive in other ways.

SOLUTION

Thankfully, Robert had a brother who looked out for him as well as an incredible school in Maryland that specialized in educating blind children. Seven years ago, Robert became an adult member of Bookshare, the world’s largest library of accessible ebooks. The online library helps him read anything he wants independently. Reading ebooks with his preferred technology devices -- an iPad and Victor Reader Stream – opened many doors because reading is infectious. “Once you know how many titles (over 720,000) are in the Bookshare collection, the world is vast and reading enjoyment just takes over. I search for one book and always know what I’m reading next,” he says.

IMPACT

“The fact that you can explore thousands of titles is amazing,” says Robert. Blind people could not do that before because reading options were very limited. Bookshare members have access to a huge selection of books, and there are no time limits or returns. It’s easy to find old books and new titles for all ages and interests. Bookshare has unleashed information that can help blind people read and learn like sighted people. Accessible ebooks help increase opportunities for individuals with disabilities to learn how to become professors, musicians, or any career you can imagine. “Life is a big challenge, and you’ve got to keep pushing the limits,” says Robert.

Benetech is a nonprofit that empowers communities through software for social good. Our work transforms how people with disabilities read and learn, makes it safer for human rights defenders to pursue truth and justice, and connects people to the services they need to live and prosper. We’re constantly pursuing the next big social impact.